

COASTAL CONSERVANCY

Staff Recommendation  
February 6, 2019

**SANTA MARIA LEVEE TRAIL FEASIBILITY STUDY**

Project No. 19-054-01  
Project Manager: Rachel Couch

**RECOMMENDED ACTION:** Authorization to disburse up to \$40,000 to the County of Santa Barbara to prepare a design and feasibility study for the Santa Maria River Levee Trail in Santa Barbara County.

**LOCATION:** Northern Santa Barbara County

**PROGRAM CATEGORY:** Public Access

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EXHIBITS

- Exhibit 1: [Project Location Map](#)
  - Exhibit 2: [Figures and Photos](#)
  - Exhibit 3: [Project Letters](#)
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**RESOLUTION AND FINDINGS:**

Staff recommends that the State Coastal Conservancy adopt the following resolution pursuant to Sections 31400-31410 of the Public Resources Code:

“The State Coastal Conservancy hereby authorizes the disbursement of an amount not to exceed forty thousand dollars (\$40,000) to the County of Santa Barbara (“the grantee”) to prepare a design and feasibility study for the Santa Maria River Levee Trail in Santa Barbara County.

Prior to commencement of the project, the grantee shall submit for the review and written approval of the Executive Officer of the Conservancy (Executive Officer) the following:

1. A detailed work program, schedule, and budget.
  2. Names and qualifications of any contractors to be retained in carrying out the project.
  3. A plan for acknowledgement of Conservancy funding.
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4. In addition, to the extent appropriate, the grantee shall incorporate the guidelines of the Conservancy's 'Standards and Recommendations for Accessway Location and Development' and the requirements of all applicable federal and state laws governing barrier-free access for persons with disabilities into the project."

Staff further recommends that the Conservancy adopt the following findings:

"Based on the accompanying staff report and attached exhibits, the State Coastal Conservancy hereby finds that:

1. The proposed authorization is consistent with Chapter 9 of Division 21 of the Public Resources Code, regarding public access.
2. The proposed project is consistent with the current Conservancy Project Selection Criteria and Guidelines."

**PROJECT SUMMARY:**

Staff recommends that the Conservancy authorize disbursement of up to \$40,000 to the County of Santa Barbara to prepare a feasibility study to extend the Santa Maria River Levee Trail from the City of Santa Maria 6.7 miles west to the City of Guadalupe. If constructed, the trail would enable future connection to the coast and the California Coastal Trail in the Guadalupe-Nipomo Dunes Complex, an 18-mile stretch of coastal dune ecosystem extending from southern San Luis Obispo County to northern Santa Barbara County. The feasibility study will identify significant constraints or obstacles to developing the envisioned bike and pedestrian trail, provide engineering detail, estimated costs and design of the trail.

The proposed Conservancy grant will allow the County of Santa Barbara, which operates and maintains the levee, to complete the necessary design concept analysis, stakeholder engagement, and engineering review to adequately assess the feasibility of extending the levee trail. (See Exhibit 1) The majority of the analysis will consist of designing improvements to the surface of the levee top for rideability and walkability, and may also include advisory signage, fencing or other guides to keep people on the trail. The County will prepare engineering drawings to depict the scope of the trail and display connection points from the levee trail to the City of Guadalupe in the west, the City of Santa Maria to the east, and at points along the route including a connection at Bonita School Road Crossing. The County will also conduct preliminary environmental analysis to determine required environmental review documents and permits and to identify any potential impact areas that would affect trail alignment, materials used, or other project details. Stakeholder meetings will help identify other issues of concern and potential solutions. The final feasibility study will include a preferred design of the bike trail, specifications, and cost estimates for the bike trail corridor concept.

Northwestern Santa Barbara County lacks robust multi-use active transportation infrastructure compared to neighboring areas. The Santa Barbara County Association of Governments (SBCAG) acknowledged this in its most recent Regional Active Transportation Plan (2015) by

including a potential active transportation route along the Santa Maria River Levee. The Santa Maria River Levee is a partially paved, multi-purpose facility built by the United States Army Corps of Engineers in the early 1960s to protect surrounding farmlands from flooding. The levee extends from the City of Santa Maria to the City of Guadalupe. Currently, only the portion of the levee located in the City of Santa Maria is developed as a multi-use trail accessible to the public. This segment is enjoyed by pedestrians and cyclists from nearby communities.

The goal of extending the levee trail is to expand and improve public access and provide an alternative east-west active transportation corridor. The trail will provide an alternative to California State Route 166, which is heavily used by freight, farming, and commercial vehicles and not a good alternative for bicycles. Extending the levee trail and completing the City's beach route would provide a safe, alternative route for walkers and bicyclists from Santa Maria all the way to the beach. The Coastal Conservancy is working with the City of Guadalupe to develop a trail connection from the City through the dunes to coastal access points near Guadalupe.

The project will consider a crossing at Bonita School Road and a connection point to a new bridge with bicycle and pedestrian facilities to be constructed across the river, better connecting to nearby cities in southern San Luis Obispo County. It would serve to enhance regional connectivity by providing a safe separated route to the Pacific Coast Highway (State Route 1), a popular route used by recreational cyclists traveling throughout California.

The underlying owner of the levee is the Army Corps of Engineers (ACE). The study will explore project designs that avoid or minimize changes to the levee configuration, which could require ACE permits. The levee is operated and maintained by the Santa Barbara County Flood Control District. Proposed improvements would be coordinated with these agencies to ensure no negative impacts or major modifications are needed to the levee, habitat, or existing operations.

**Site Description:** The project is located in unincorporated northern Santa Barbara County, along the south side of the Santa Maria River in an area dominated by suburban residential and large commercial agricultural land uses. The site consists of an approximately 6.7-mile long segment of unimproved dirt accessway that stretches from east to west atop the Santa Maria River Levee between the City of Santa Maria to the City of Guadalupe. (See Exhibit 2). The levee is approximately 16-18 feet wide at the top, then slopes down at approximately 2:1 to the river on the north side and farmland on the south. The surface of the levee is generally graded flat, with a rocky soil cover. The river is surrounded by agricultural lands on both the north and south side. Agricultural crops grown along the proposed section of levee trail vary by season, and are predominantly broccoli, strawberries, and lettuce.

Guadalupe is in northern Santa Barbara County approximately 10 miles west of the City of Santa Maria. The two towns are connected by Highway 166. Guadalupe is situated where east-west Highway 166 intersects with north-south Highway 1, resulting in a lot of commercial truck traffic through the city serving the local agriculture industry. The Santa Maria River defines the northern edge of the city, and the Guadalupe Nipomo Dunes are three to five miles to the west, a destination for both locals and tourists. Guadalupe has a population of 7,625 people with a

high percentage of residents under 30 years old. The population is 86% of Hispanic origin and 8% Caucasian. The City meets the definition of a Disadvantaged Community according to Department of Water Resources (DWR) Disadvantaged Communities (DAC) criteria.

Santa Maria has a population of 108,500, comprising nearly a quarter of the County's population. The main economic drivers include construction, farming, and service jobs. The City's median age is 30 years old. The City is 74% of Hispanic origin with 17% of families in the City having below-poverty-level incomes. Most of the City of Santa Maria is designated as either Disadvantaged or Severely Disadvantaged Communities under DWR DAC criteria, while some areas are designated as Low-Income Communities under AB 1550.

The Santa Maria Valley Multi-Purpose Trail stretches for 2.7 miles along a paved portion of the levee within the City's jurisdiction. The City is currently updating its Active Transportation Plan to improve the convenience, safety and accessibility of walking and biking in the City. The city averages 40 documented bicycle and pedestrian accidents annually. The Plan will build upon the 2009 Bikeway Plan and Downtown Multi-modal Streetscape Plan to encourage physical activity as a part of everyday travel and support the City's goals for cleaner air and a healthier, more equitable and sustainable community.

**Grantee Qualifications:** Santa Barbara County Flood Control District operates and maintains the Santa Maria River Levee for flood control purposes. The Transportation Division of the County's Public Works Department would manage the project. The Division has a long and successful track record of constructing active transportation projects in the County, managing \$10-20 million per year in local, state, and federal grant funded projects from Safe Routes to School, Active Transportation Program, Highway Bridge Program, Measure A, and Highway Safety Improvement programs. The Division utilizes fiscal systems with tight controls including internal and external audits to ensure all financial operations meet funding and grant requirements; maintains a multimillion-dollar reserve fund to handle cash flow; and employs financial professionals who are well-versed in invoicing and reimbursement processes for various grants. For other technical project activities, the Division employs a staff that includes multiple licensed professional engineers, engineering associates, senior environmental planners, project managers, a geologist, structures specialists, a surveyor, and technicians with the skills and expertise to carry out all project activities.

**Project History:** The project was identified by the active transportation community as a priority project for the area. In 2018, the County applied for an Active Transportation Program grant to design and construct the improvements, but the grant was not awarded. During that process, the County determined that the corridor needed further study and additional stakeholder input before pursuing a grant for full implementation. The proposed project would allow completion of those efforts enabling submission of a more developed and competitive grant application. Conservancy staff was contacted by County staff regarding funding opportunities in 2019, after discussions regarding other recreation and active transportation projects being planned in the area.

**PROJECT FINANCING**

<b>Coastal Conservancy</b>	<b>\$40,000</b>
Santa Barbara County	\$40,000
<b>Project Total</b>	<b>\$80,000</b>

The anticipated sources of Conservancy funds for the project is an appropriation from the Safe Neighborhood Parks, Clean Water, Clean Air, and Coastal Protection Bond Act of 2000 (Proposition 12, Public Resources Code Section 5096.300, et seq.). The Conservancy’s appropriation of Proposition 12 funds may be used pursuant to Division 21 of the Public Resources Code for the acquisition from a willing seller, preservation, restoration, and enhancement of real property or an interest in real property in coastal areas and watersheds within its jurisdiction and the development of public use facilities. (Public Resources Code Section 5096.352) Proposition 12 directs that a portion of funds appropriated to the Conservancy be used specifically for Central Coast projects, including projects in Santa Cruz, Monterey, San Luis Obispo, or Santa Barbara Counties (Section 5096.352(c)(3)). The proposed project will evaluate the feasibility of extending the Santa Maria River Trail as a new public use facility in Barbara County, consistent with Chapter 9 of the Conservancy’s enabling legislation, as discussed below.

The County will match the Conservancy’s contribution in addition to providing in-kind services.

**CONSISTENCY WITH CONSERVANCY’S ENABLING LEGISLATION:**

This project would be undertaken pursuant to Chapter 9 of the Conservancy’s enabling legislation, Division 21 of the Public Resources Code (Sections 31400-31410), regarding public access and enjoyment of coastal resources. Section 31400 states the Legislature’s intent that the Conservancy play a principal role in the implementation of a system of public accessways to and along the coast. Through the proposed authorization the Conservancy would assist in assessing the feasibility of safe and appropriate public access to the coast and connection to the California Coastal Trail.

Section 31400.1 allows the Conservancy to award grants to a public agency for development of accessways to and along the coast that serve more than local public needs. Consistent with this section, the proposed project will assess the feasibility of a new river parkway trail that will connect inland Santa Barbara with the coast.

Section 31400.2 authorizes the Conservancy to provide up to the total cost of the initial development of a public accessway by any public agency or nonprofit organization and requires the Conservancy to consider several factors in determining the amount of funding for an access project. Consistent with this section, the proposed amount of the Conservancy contribution was determined based on the total amount of funding available to the Conservancy for public access projects, the fiscal resources of the applicant, and the Conservancy’s Project Selection Criteria, including project urgency (See Consistency with Conservancy’s Project Selection

Criteria & Guidelines). The Conservancy's contribution will be leveraged by the County's contribution of 50 percent of the project costs.

Section 31400.3 authorizes the Conservancy to assist public agencies in developing and implementing a system of public accessways to and along the state's coastline. The proposed project will further these goals by improving and enhancing public access in a heavily visited coastal region.

Section 31409 authorizes the Conservancy to award grants and provide assistance to public agencies and nonprofit organizations to establish and expand those inland trail systems that may be linked to the California Coastal Trail. Santa Barbara County is a public agency that manages land along the Santa Maria River Levee. The trail if constructed would connect to coastal access points.

**CONSISTENCY WITH CONSERVANCY'S ACCESS PROGRAM STANDARDS:**

**Standard No. 1, Protect Public and Coastal Resources:** The feasibility study will assess how the levee trail can safely accommodate public access while minimizing changes to the levee itself and protecting adjacent agricultural areas.

**Standard No. 2, Correct Hazards:** The proposed levee trail would provide an alternative route to the unsafe conditions that exist in the current option along Highway 166. In addition, the feasibility study will assess the potential impacts of pesticides on trail users and identify appropriate management strategies.

**Standard No. 5, Environmentally Sensitive Areas:** The proposed project concept will be designed to improve the existing levee surface and would avoid or minimize any adverse effects on the adjacent river channel.

**Standard No. 8, Trails:** The proposed project will study the feasibility of improving an existing levee to provide continuous non-motorized public access from inland communities to the Guadalupe-Nipomo Dunes coastal area.

**Standard No. 9, Scenic Overlooks:** Opportunities for scenic overlook locations would be considered in the project.

**Standard No. 10, Coastal Bikeways:** The proposed project will provide conceptual designs of Class I bicycle path, designated for exclusive use of bicyclists and pedestrians. These designs will consider connection to nearby segments of the California Coastal Trail.

**Standard No. 12, Support Facilities:** Designs for the project will consider the placement of support facilities such as overlooks, benches and trash receptacles, as appropriate.

**Standard No. 13, Barrier-Free Access:** The proposed project will be wheelchair accessible along its entire length.

**CONSISTENCY WITH CONSERVANCY'S 2018-2022 STRATEGIC PLAN GOAL(S) & OBJECTIVE(S):**

Consistent with **Goal 2, Objective A** of the Conservancy's 2018-2022 Strategic Plan, the proposed project will enhance opportunities for access for people with disabilities to and along the coast.

Consistent with **Goal 2, Objective E**, the proposed project will assess the future design of a bike trail corridor connecting inland Santa Maria and Guadalupe communities to paths leading to the Rancho Guadalupe Dunes coastal area.

Consistent with **Goal 16, Objective A**, the proposed project will benefit disadvantaged communities located in the cities of Santa Maria and Guadalupe.

**CONSISTENCY WITH CONSERVANCY'S PROJECT SELECTION CRITERIA & GUIDELINES:**

The proposed project is consistent with the Conservancy's Project Selection Criteria and Guidelines, last updated on October 2, 2014, in the following respects:

**Required Criteria**

1. **Promotion of the Conservancy's statutory programs and purposes:** See the "Consistency with Conservancy's Enabling Legislation" section above.
2. **Consistency with purposes of the funding source:** See the "Project Financing" section above.
3. **Promotion and implementation of state plans and policies:**

California @ 50 Million: The Environmental Goals and Policy Report: The proposed project meets "Goal 2: Build Sustainable Regions that Support Healthy, Livable Communities" by assessing feasibility of trail construction supporting increased bicycling and walking.

The California Blueprint for Bicycling and Walking 2002: The proposed project will provide conceptual designs of Class I bicycle path (separated path), which will help achieve the goal of increasing the number of bicycles and walking trips statewide by 50%.

California Wellness Plan (2014). The proposed project will promote goal 1.5 of the California Wellness Plan to increase biking and walking by providing 6.7 miles of pedestrian trails near an urban community.

4. **Support of the public:** The project is supported by County Supervisors Joan Hartmann and Steve Lavagnino, State Senator Hannah-Beth Jackson, Assemblymember Monique Limón, the cities of Guadalupe and Santa Maria, and the Santa Barbara Bicycle Coalition, and the Guadalupe-Nipomo Dunes Center, among other community organizations.
5. **Location:** The proposed project would be located along the Santa Maria River, a coastal watershed that drains to the Pacific Ocean at Rancho Guadalupe Dunes County Preserve.
6. **Need:** If Conservancy funds were not available, studies may not be completed in a timely manner that would enable the project to compete for upcoming State Active Transportation

Program implementation funding rounds. Grantee was not awarded a previous planning grant for the project because the project lacked sufficient stakeholder outreach on a conceptual design, which this grant will address.

7. **Greater-than-local interest:** This project would complete a critical gap in the envisioned regional active transportation network because it will include a river crossing at Bonita School Road connecting to new bicycle and pedestrian facilities to be constructed across the river, thereby expanding the network connecting Santa Barbara and San Luis Obispo Counties. It will provide a link from the urban center of Santa Maria to the Guadalupe Dunes Complex for recreational users, both locals and visitors, and will also benefit disadvantaged communities in both cities by creating a protected travel path between the communities of Santa Maria with Guadalupe and into a bicycle route system that leads to and along the coast (Pacific Coast Highway 1 and coastal access points).
8. **Sea level rise vulnerability:** The project involves studies to determine the feasibility of constructing a trail. At the downstream end, the levee elevation is approximately 80 feet and 4.7 miles inland from the coast and therefore the proposed trail is not projected to be impacted by rising sea levels in the next 30-70 years.

#### **Additional Criteria**

8. **Leverage:** See the “Project Financing” section above.
9. **Readiness:** The County is ready to begin work on the project in early 2020.
10. **Realization of prior Conservancy goals:** The project would complement a Conservancy-funded project to prepare a feasibility study from Guadalupe to the beach. It also would tie into ongoing efforts to improve access at Rancho Guadalupe Dunes County Preserve.
11. **Vulnerability from climate change impacts other than sea level rise:** The project involves studies to determine the feasibility of constructing a trail. The project, if built, could potentially be affected by extreme precipitation event projected by climate associated impacts that could cause flooding of the trail if the adjacent river were to overtop the levee. The feasibility study will address this and other issues related to the construction and maintenance of the trail.
12. **Minimization of greenhouse gas emissions:** The project consists of plans and studies and will not increase greenhouse gas emissions. The trail project, if constructed, would reduce greenhouse gas emissions by promoting non-motorized modes of transportation.

#### **CEQA COMPLIANCE:**

The project is statutorily exempt from the provisions of the California Environmental Quality Act (CEQA) pursuant to 14 Cal. Code of Regulations Section 15262, because it involves only feasibility or planning studies for possible future actions, which the Conservancy has not yet approved, adopted, or agreed to fund. As required by Section 15262, planning for this project will include consideration of environmental factors.



Upon Conservancy approval of the project, staff will file a Notice of Exemption.