

COASTAL CONSERVANCY

Staff Recommendation
February 6, 2020

BAY AREA RIDGE TRAIL: ROCKVILLE TRAILS PRESERVE CONSTRUCTION

File No. 19-036-01
Project Manager: Brenda Buxton

RECOMMENDED ACTION: Authorization to disburse up to \$200,000 to the Solano Land Trust for construction of a staging area and other public amenities at Rockville Trails Preserve to allow access to new Bay Area Ridge Trail segments, and adoption of findings under the California Environmental Quality Act.

LOCATION: Rockville Trails Preserve, Solano County (Exhibit 1)

PROGRAM CATEGORY: San Francisco Bay Area Conservancy Program

EXHIBITS

Exhibit 1: [Project Location and Site Map](#)

Exhibit 2: [Project Trail and Staging Area Plans and Site Photos](#)

Exhibit 3: [Letters of Support](#)

Exhibit 4: [Mitigated Negative Declaration for Rockville Trails Preserve General Plan Amendment](#)

RESOLUTION AND FINDINGS:

Staff recommends that the State Coastal Conservancy adopt the following resolution pursuant to Sections 31160-31165 of the Public Resources Code:

“The State Coastal Conservancy hereby authorizes the disbursement of up to two hundred thousand dollars (\$200,000) to the Solano Land Trust (SLT) for construction of a staging area and other public amenities to allow access to a new 2.21-mile Bay Area Ridge Trail segment at Rockville Trails Preserve, subject to the following conditions:

1. Prior to commencing the project, the SLT shall submit for the review and approval of the Executive Officer of the Conservancy a work program, including project schedule and budget, the names of any contractors and/or subcontractors to be employed on the project, evidence that all permits and approvals necessary to implement the project have been obtained; and a signing plan for the project.

2. Prior to commencing the project, the SLT shall enter into and record an agreement consistent with Section 31116(c) of the Public Resources Code to protect the public's interest in the improvements.
3. The SLT shall provide evidence that all necessary permits and approvals have been obtained."

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 project is consistent with the Project Selection Criteria and Guidelines, last updated by the Conservancy on September 20, 2007.
2. The proposed authorization is consistent with the purposes and objectives of Chapter 4.5 of Division 21 of the Public Resources Code, regarding public access improvements to and around San Francisco Bay.
3. The Conservancy has independently reviewed and considered the "Mitigated Negative Declaration of the Solano County Department of Resource Management – Rockville Trails Preserve" adopted by Solano County on June 20, 2017 and attached to the accompanying staff recommendation as Exhibit 4. The Conservancy finds that the project, with the mitigation measures incorporated into the project, avoids, reduces or mitigates potential significant environmental effects and that there is no substantial evidence that the project will have a significant effect on the environment, as defined in 14 California Code of Regulations Section 15382.
4. The SLT is a nonprofit organization existing under section 501(c)(3) of the U.S. Internal Revenue Code."

PROJECT SUMMARY:

This authorization would provide up to \$200,000 to the Solano Land Trust (SLT) for construction of a new public staging area at the Rockville Trails Preserve to allow access to a new 2.21-mile segment of Bay Area Ridge Trail.

Once slated for a residential and golf course development, the SLT was able to acquire the Rockville Trails Preserve with a fundraising campaign that included \$3.56 million from the Conservancy. The SLT subsequently completed a management plan in 2014 to create the Rockville Trails Preserve. Since then the SLT has been engaged in a multi-year design and permitting process, including re-zoning, a General Plan amendment, development of trail system and staging area plans, and CEQA analysis.

The proposed project consists of completing final engineering, securing permits, and constructing a trail staging area consisting of a new public entrance, parking, and trailhead amenities such as picnic tables, signage, children's play area, and restrooms. The staging area

will provide access to an 11.25-mile network of recreational trails for hikers, mountain-bikers, and equestrians (Exhibit 2). The SLT has secured nearly all of the funding for trail construction and has completed most of the new trail work. The remaining trail miles are existing ranching roads that require minor improvement, which is not part of the proposed project. The primary funding need now is for the new staging area, and the SLT is actively engaged in a fundraising campaign. As with past projects, the SLT expects that Conservancy funds will provide a successful “kick off” to the fundraising process.

Once all the trails are constructed, over two miles of trails on Rockville Trails Preserve will be dedicated as Ridge Trail (see Trail Plan in Exhibit 2). Upon completion of a road crossing to the south, this Rockville Trails segment will connect with four miles of trail through Rockville Hills Regional Park and the Vintage Valley area, creating an over six-mile long stretch of Ridge Trail. Ultimately, in the longer term, the Preserve’s Ridge Trail will also connect to the north but additional acquisitions will be needed to complete the alignment. In the interim, the Rockville Trails Preserve segment is designed to be a 3.14-mile loop in order to provide an interesting experience for the user. The trail network will also feature a 0.48 loop trail close to the staging area with gentle grades, smooth surfacing, and multiple resting areas tailored to families with small children, people with limited mobility, and others seeking a shorter, easier route.

The staging area will include a new entrance, signage, and a 40-foot wide, paved driveway that reduces to a 20-foot wide gravel drive. The parking lot will accommodate 57 automobiles, plus five spaces for horse trailers and busses, and will be surfaced with permeable paving to the extent allowed by Solano County. Gates and fences will be improved. The staging area will include picnic and play areas with concrete picnic tables, ADA- compatible shaded resting areas, ADA-compatible concrete vault toilets, educational and directional signage, a pay station, bicycle rack, hitching post and water for horses. The picnic areas will be located in natural settings that are fenced off from cattle and will include areas with ADA- compatible surfacing. Nature-based play areas will allow kids to interact with nature, such as boulders to climb and a multisensory garden to explore. The SLT anticipates completing final engineering and permits in 2020 with construction being completed in 2021.

The SLT has incorporated data from its recent community outreach project, as well as diverse stakeholder input for the Rockville trail and staging area plans, to design public access amenities that will serve both outdoor enthusiasts and people who are less familiar with or comfortable in natural areas. Cattle-free picnic and play areas, accessible facilities, and appealing interpretive signs aim to provide a safe and comfortable experience for all visitors. The SLT staff sought input from hikers, mountain bikers, equestrians, neighbors, teachers, youth groups, the Yocha Dehe Wintun Nation, and others to ensure that the new public access amenities would support use by diverse groups.

Site Description: Rockville Trails Preserve is the southern tip of the Blue Ridge-Berryessa Natural Area, a 1,250- square-mile, virtually undeveloped swath of land bordered by Route 12 in Napa and Solano Counties in the south, and by Lake Berryessa and Clear Lake in Napa and Lake Counties in the north. The 1500-acre Preserve is adjacent to the City of Fairfield’s Rockville Hills Regional Park, and Napa County’s Skyline Park lies about two miles to the west. The City of Fairfield Rockville Hills Regional Park is a well-used park with hundreds of visitors each week.

The popularity of this neighboring park will provide visibility to the new Rockville Trails Preserve. Eventually, the City Park and the Preserve will be connected through a safe road crossing and will directly connect with 4.2 miles of existing Ridge Trail in Rockville Hills Regional Park and on Vintage Valley Trail in Fairfield. Both these locations contain segments of the Ridge Trail and along with the larger project will be a significant addition to this important regional trail system. The SLT expects the Preserve to become a county-wide recreational and educational resource that also attracts users from the San Francisco Bay and Sacramento areas.

The 1,500-acre Preserve is cloaked in annual grasslands and oak savannah with picturesque ancient trees and showy seasonal wildflower displays. The Preserve's ridgelines provide spectacular vistas to Suisun Valley, Green Valley and points south. Special-status species like nodding harmonia (*Harmonia nutans*) and ferruginous hawks, and the volcanic geology of Harmonia Hill add unique interest for natural history enthusiasts. Several intermittent drainages come to life in the rainy season, and feed into off-site streams supporting steelhead trout. Evidence of generations of human use can also be found. See Exhibit 2 for project site photos.

The Preserve is a key wildlife corridor to this important region, which is known for its unique geology and habitat diversity. The Preserve supports 900 acres of diverse oak woodland and savanna dominated by blue oaks, including heritage oaks more than 800 years old. There are also 18 identified oracle oaks, a hybrid of black and interior live oak, which are considered a phenomenon of special interest. The Preserve also provides habitat for more than 74 species of birds and offers spectacular scenic views to the thousands of visitors who will hike, walk, bike, and ride upon horseback this land each year.

The distinctive natural and cultural history of the Preserve provides many opportunities for inspiration and learning. The SLT is working with the Yocha Dehe Wintun Nation to tell the story of their relationship to the area. These stories, along with stories of the ecology and agricultural traditions of the Preserve will help visitors deepen their own connections to this special place.

Grantee Qualifications: The SLT has both active and completed restoration, acquisition, educational, and trail projects with Coastal Conservancy support. This includes Ridge Trail projects, such as planning for two-miles of Swett Ranch Ridge Trail, construction of four miles of Ridge Trail at Lynch Canyon which include a staging area and amenities, and in 2011, the acquisition of the 1,500-acre Rockville Trails Reserve property where the proposed project is located (see "Project History" below).

Project History: The vision for the Bay Area Ridge Trail is a 500-mile multi-use (serving hikers, mountain bicyclists and equestrians), continuous trail that rings San Francisco Bay high on the ridgeline. Under the leadership of the Conservancy and the Bay Area Ridge Trail Council (BARTC) and supported by a diverse group of project participants, the Ridge Trail creates an interconnected system of open space and trails that provides recreational opportunities and scenic views to the public. Begun almost 20 years ago, over 375 miles of trail are now dedicated and/or open to the public in all nine Bay Area counties. This authorization will further the Conservancy's statutory and strategic goals of improving access around San Francisco Bay, and is consistent with previous Conservancy authorizations to negotiate and acquire trail

easements, prepare trail construction plans and designs, and construct and open trail segments to the public.

Starting in the 1970's, the area currently known as the Rockville Trails Preserve was at high risk for development, with proposals including a 600-home residential development, multiple golf courses and a packaged sewer treatment plant. In 2008 Solano County approved an upscale 360-home residential development on the property. However, the community had a different vision and, together with the SLT, raised money to purchase and protect Rockville Trails Preserve for everyone. The Coastal Conservancy contributed \$3,565,000 to the project, including funds for acquisition and developing the management plan, which was completed in 2014.

PROJECT FINANCING:

Coastal Conservancy	\$200,000
Yocha Dehe Wintun Nation (pending)	<u>1,192,720</u>
Total Project Cost	\$1,392,720

The anticipated source of Conservancy funds is the fiscal year 18/19 appropriation to the Conservancy from the California Drought, Water, Parks, Climate, Coastal Protection, and Outdoor Access for All Act of 2018 ("Proposition 68," Public Resources Code Sections 80000, et seq.). Chapter 9 of Proposition 68, Ocean, Bay, and Coastal Protection, allocates funds for projects that enhance and protect coast and ocean resources, including projects that are consistent with the San Francisco Bay Area Conservancy Program. (Pub. Res. Code section 80120(d)). As defined by Proposition 68, protection of coastal resources includes actions that will improve public access and actions that will allow the continued use and enjoyment of property or natural, cultural, and historic resources. (Section 80002(l)). The proposed project will provide public access to the Bay Area Ridge Trail and includes improvements that will facilitate public use and enjoyment of the natural resources of the Rockville Trails Preserve. The project is consistent with the San Francisco Bay Area Conservancy Program. This project is further consistent with Proposition 68 because it will leverage funds from other sources. The SLT has also applied to the Yocha Dehe Wintun Nation for funding. In addition, approximately \$5,000 in-kind services will be provided by the SLT.

CONSISTENCY WITH CONSERVANCY'S ENABLING LEGISLATION:

Pursuant to Section 31162(a) of the Public Resources Code, the Conservancy may award grants for projects in the nine-county San Francisco Bay Area that will help to improve public access to, within, and around the ridgetops, consistent with the rights of private property owners, and without having a significant adverse impact on agricultural operations and environmentally sensitive areas and wildlife. Consistent with Section 31162(a), the proposed project will construct a staging area with parking spaces and visitor amenities at the Rockville Trails Preserve to provide access to the Preserve for recreation, including 2.21 miles of new Ridge Trail.

Consistent with Section 31163(a), the Conservancy cooperates with nonprofit land trusts and other organizations in identifying and adopting long-term resource and outdoor recreational goals for the San Francisco Bay Area. Completion of the Ridge Trail is identified in (1) *The San Francisco Bay Area Conservancy Program Regional Needs Briefing Book (Bay Area Ridge Trail Council, July 1999)* and (2) *400 Miles and Beyond: A Strategic Plan for Completing the Bay Area Ridge Trail (BARTC, Draft 2006)*.

Consistent with Section 31163(c), the proposed project is a priority for funding because it: (1) is supported by an adopted local or regional plan, including the Solano County General Plan and this alignment has been adopted by the BARTC; (2) is multijurisdictional/serves a regional constituency by adding trail connections to the adjacent Rockville Hills Regional Park and Vintage Valley Trail in Fairfield; (3) can be implemented in a timely way; (4) provides opportunities for benefits that could be lost if the project is not quickly implemented which could slow construction, delaying opening the new trail system to the public; and (5) includes matching funds.

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

Consistent with **Goal 13, Objective B** of the Conservancy's 2018 Strategic Plan, the proposed project will provide recreational facilities, specifically a staging area with parking spaces and visitor amenities.

Consistent with **Goal 13, Objective G**, the proposed project will provide access to a 2.21 new segment of the Ridge Trail.

Consistent with **Goal 13, Objective I**, the proposed project will help facilitate trail links between Ridge Trail segments and Rockville Hills Regional Park.

Consistent with **Goal 13, Objective L**, the proposed project will implement a project that expands access for people with disabilities.

**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:** This project will construct a staging area that will provide access to trails including the Bay Area Ridge Trail which helps implement the following regional and state plans:

400 miles and Beyond: A Strategic Plan for Completing the Bay Area Ridge Trail. This report released by the Bay Area Ridge Trail in 2006 lays out priorities for the completion of the 500-plus mile multi-use trail encircling the ridgetops of the San Francisco Bay Area.

California @ 50 Million: The Environmental Goals and Policy Report (Governor's Office of Planning and Research, Draft 2013): Goal 2, "Build Sustainable Regions that Support Healthy, Livable Communities," specific strategy to "support and invest in active transportation projects, such as walking and biking infrastructure."

California Recreational Trails Plan (California State Parks, Phase I, June 2002): The Bay Area Ridge Trail is identified in the plan as a state trail corridor and meets the goal to "promote adequate design, construction, relocation, and maintenance of trails in order to optimize public access and resource conservation".

4. **Support of the public:** Completion of the Ridge Trail is a regionally supported project spearheaded by the nonprofit Bay Area Ridge Trail Council (BARTC). The construction of the Rockville Trails Preserve staging area will allow the Ridge Trail to dedicate additional Ridge Trail miles. Furthermore, Solano County, the Green Valley Landowners Association (neighbors and prospective preserve visitors), the Solano County Orderly Growth Committee, Yocha Dehe Wintun Nation, VIBE Solano Alliance, area trail-user groups, local winery owners, SLT volunteers, and existing SLT donors have also expressed support for the project.
5. **Location:** The project is located in the Rockville Trails Preserve in Solano County, which lies entirely within the jurisdiction of the San Francisco Bay Area Conservancy Program.
6. **Need:** The SLT has raised funds for trail construction but needs additional funding from the Conservancy to complete the staging area construction.
7. **Greater-than-local interest:** This project will serve the residents of Solano County as well as provide access to the Ridge Trail which is a regional-wide recreational resource that connects multiple habitats, landscapes, and jurisdictions along a multi-use trail segment.
8. **Sea level rise vulnerability:** The project is in the interior of Solano County and not directly impacted by sea level rise.

Additional Criteria

14. **Readiness:** The SLT has been working on the project since 2014 and completed the CEQA review in 2017. The SLT continued to refine project plans based on stakeholder input and the SLT received County approval of the revised trail and staging area plans in 2019.
15. **Realization of prior Conservancy goals:** Completion of the Ridge Trail is a specific objective of the Conservancy's 2018 Strategic Plan and completion of the staging area will allow

access to over two new miles of Ridge Trail. In addition, this project will add valuable open space and recreational opportunities on a property the Conservancy helped the SLT acquire.

18. **Vulnerability from climate change impacts other than sea level rise:** Fire and drought are potential climate change-related vulnerabilities to this project, both of which could damage visitor amenities and degrade habitat. Although the primary focus of Conservancy funding is to develop public access amenities, the SLT has also developed a plan for habitat restoration and vegetation management. Specifically, SLT is updating livestock-water infrastructure to enhance grazing management for the health of the grassland community and to reduce wildfire risk; SLT has started replanting oaks to replace hundreds of trees that were clear-cut sometime between the 1940's and 1970's; and the SLT intends to plant other native vegetation along riparian corridors. By responsibly managing vegetation at this property, SLT will reduce the risk of fire damage to the new visitor amenities and improve the ecological resilience of the preserve.
19. **Minimization of greenhouse gas emissions:** Some greenhouse gas emissions will be created during project construction, and then by users traveling to the Preserve in their personal vehicles. SLT's oak regeneration project is expected to provide long-term carbon sequestration that will help offset these greenhouse gas emissions. SLT staff has also talked with local transportation agencies about adding a public transportation stop at the Preserve, including regular bus service and para transit services. This may be a possibility as park use increases. SLT is also engaged in "carbon farming" research on two of its other properties and may expand this research to Rockville Trails. Managed grasslands have significant potential to fix additional carbon in the soil and aid in efforts to reduce atmospheric carbon.

COMPLIANCE WITH CEQA:

Pursuant to CEQA and CEQA Guidelines (California Code of Regulations Title 14, sections 15000 et seq.) , the Solano County Department of Resource Management, as lead agency, prepared, circulated, and, on June 20, 2017, adopted the "Mitigated Negative Declaration of the Solano County Department of Resource Management – Rockville Trails Preserve" (MND) (attached at Exhibit 4), which addresses the Rockville Trails Preserve General Plan Amendment, which included changing the County's General Plan to rezone the project site from Rural Residential to Agricultural, with an allowance for public open space and low-impact recreation and educational uses. The MND addresses the potential impacts of the proposed staging area construction.

The MND identified potential impacts in the areas of biological resources and cultural resources. In terms of biological resources, construction of trails and the staging area could potentially have impacts to the nodding harmonia, native blue oaks, nesting birds, and red-legged frogs. To avoid or reduce these potential impacts to a less-than-significant level, the SLT will incorporate the following mitigation measures into the project. BIO-1 requires that the SLT restrict rock lining of trail margins to the non-growing season of the nodding harmonia and enforce a seasonal closure to protect this rare species. To protect nesting birds, BIO-2 requires breeding season nest surveys and establishes procedures to protect birds if nests are

discovered. BIO-3 establishes seasonal work restrictions for construction, requires worker education, and outlines procedures if red-legged or foothill yellow-legged frogs are discovered. BIO-4 requires on site mitigation for any impacts to wetlands consistent with permit requirements. BIO-5 requires the replanting of blue oaks at a 2:1 ratio for any removed. BIO-6 establishes tree protection measures during construction and pruning. To reduce impacts to cultural resources to a less-than-significant level, the SLT is required to follow several additional measures. CR-1 establishes buffers for avoiding known archeological resources and outlines procedures if cultural materials are discovered. CR-2 outlines the protocol if human remains are discovered, including contacting the Native American Heritage Commission's designated Most Likely Descendent.

Staff has independently reviewed the MND and recommends that the Conservancy find that there is no substantial evidence that the project funded by the Conservancy, with these mitigation measures incorporated into the project, will result in a significant adverse effect on the environment as defined in 14 Cal. Code of Regulations Section 15382. Staff will file a Notice of Determination upon approval of the project.