

COASTAL CONSERVANCY

Staff Recommendation
November 19, 2020

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Project No. 20-034-01
Project Manager: Timothy Duff

RECOMMENDED ACTION: Authorization to disburse up to \$250,000 to the County of San Luis Obispo to construct public access improvements to an existing informal coastal park at Cave Landing, San Luis Obispo County.

LOCATION: Between Avila Beach and Shell Beach, San Luis Obispo County (Exhibit 1)

PROGRAM CATEGORY: Public Access

EXHIBITS

Exhibit 1: [Project Location Map](#)

Exhibit 2: [Site Photos](#)

Exhibit 3: [Site Plan](#)

Exhibit 4: [Project Letters](#)

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 \$250,000 (two hundred fifty thousand dollars) to the County of San Luis Obispo (County) to construct public access improvements to an existing informal coastal park at Cave Landing, subject to the following conditions:

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.
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3. A plan for acknowledgement of Conservancy funding.
4. Evidence that all permits and approvals required to implement the project have been obtained.

In addition, to the extent appropriate, the grantee shall incorporate into the project the guidelines of the Conservancy's 'Standards and Recommendations for Accessway Location and Development'."

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."
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PROJECT SUMMARY:

Staff recommends the Conservancy authorize a \$250,000 grant to the County of San Luis Obispo (County) to construct public access improvements to an existing informal coastal park at Cave Landing located adjacent to Pirate's Cove beach just south of Avila Beach in San Luis Obispo County (Exhibits 1 and 2). In addition to improving an existing parking lot that serves the beach, the project will serve visitors to an existing 0.75-mile segment of the California Coastal Trail (CCT) that connects Cave Landing south to Shell Beach.

Cave Landing is a dramatic headland located between Avila Beach and Shell Beach. Multiple trails can be accessed from the parking lot including the CCT connection to Shell Beach, the path to Pirate's Cove beach, and the trail to the adjacent prehistoric cave rock formations and sea caves. This area has been a highly popular Central Coast beach destination for decades, averaging over one hundred or more visitors a day during the dry months of the year. The site's south-facing sandy beach provides visitors with protection from the region's dominant north winds and exceptional views extending south to Point Sal. From Cave Landing, hikers can explore the sea caves and rocky tidal shoreline.

In 2008 the County purchased the subject site but to date has not been able to make the improvements necessary to formally establish it as a county park (See Project History section below for more background). While the site currently provides informal, unpaved parking and beach access, the parking area is deeply rutted and can become difficult to safely access during and after wet winter storms (Exhibit 2).

The proposed improvements include repairing the existing one-acre parking lot by filling in ruts and potholes and surfacing the area with base rock to accommodate 72 cars. The project does not entail any grading or cutting of the site. Approximately 300 linear feet of vegetated

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bioswales and two cobble energy dissipaters will be installed to help manage stormwater runoff and reduce erosion (Exhibit 3). Surfacing the parking lot will result in a decrease in stormwater runoff that will be slowed by the base rock and collect in the bioretention areas for storage, infiltration, and non-erosive outflow. These improvements will also serve to protect a Native American sacred site located underneath the area. Four ADA accessible parking stalls and an accessible path and viewing area will be installed. Other amenities include two bike racks, trash and recycling receptacles, 11 directional and interpretive signs, an emergency all weather gravel turnaround, and perimeter boulders to contain vehicles in the designated parking area. While these improvements are needed to operate the site as a county park, they will not expand the current capacity of the site.

Site Description: With wide sandy beaches, mild weather, and attractive waterfronts featuring classic wood piers and commercial promenades, the three communities of Avila, Shell and Pismo Beaches are highly popular “beach town” destinations for visitors coming from throughout the region, state and beyond. The project is located at the end of Cave Landing Road in Avila Beach, approximately 3,000 feet south of the intersection of Cave Landing Road and Avila Beach Drive, within the San Luis Bay (Coastal) planning area. Cave Landing forms a peninsula jutting southwest into the ocean.

The 64-acre project site extends along the bluffs above Point San Luis Bay south of Avila Beach approximately one mile to Shell and Pismo Beaches (Exhibit 2). This site is characterized as vacant land with steep slopes, an unimproved parking lot, and a series of informal pedestrian trails along the bluffs and to the beach. The site also contains sensitive archaeological resources and is a Native American sacred site. Large homes in the community of Shell Beach are located directly to the east of the site. To the west and northwest is the abandoned Avila Tank Farm (formerly Unocal Tank Farm), Avila golf course, and beyond, the community of Avila Beach. The Pacific Ocean is to the south, and steep undeveloped hills are to the north. The project site's shoreline and offshore waters provide habitat for several special-status wildlife species including Western snowy plover, Southern sea otter, Pacific harbor seal and the California sea lion. Past studies of the site's geology indicate portions of the bluff trail are susceptible to landslide activity, and an active fault runs through or close to the site.

Grantee Qualifications: County of San Luis Obispo Parks Department has a long history managing coastal access improvement projects with funding from the Conservancy and other state and federal funding agencies. County staff has managed the construction and renovation of numerous beach access stairways built above the beach in Cayucos with Conservancy funds, including one that was completed in the summer of 2020. County Parks staff also managed a major renovation of the Cayucos Pier with funds from the Conservancy awarded in 2014. In addition, last year the County partnered with the Conservancy and other state funders to acquire Toro Creek Ranch and is currently planning for the management of public access there.

Project History: The County has been working on improving access at Cave Landing for nearly a decade. In 2013 the Conservancy awarded funds to the County to construct access improvements at the site, but the County was unable to obtain a Coastal Development Permit due to an appeal filed by local residents. For the past 5-plus years County staff have been working closely with the local community to address their concerns and has reduced the scope

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of the previously proposed access improvements in response to those concerns. In early October 2020 the County approved a coastal development permit for the redesigned project that avoids potential impacts that had previously concerned some local residents.

PROJECT FINANCING

Coastal Conservancy	\$250,000
County of San Luis Obispo	<u>\$250,000</u>
Project Total	\$500,000

Conservancy funds for this project are expected to derive from appropriations to the Conservancy from Proposition 84 (Public Resources Code Section 75001-75090). Proposition 84, under Public Resources Code 75060, authorizes the Conservancy's use of these funds for the purposes of promoting access to and enjoyment of the coastal resources of the state and that are consistent with the Conservancy's enabling legislation under Division 21. The proposed project serves to assist in the development of public access on the coast and, as discussed in the section found immediately below, the project is consistent with Chapter 9 of Division 21. In addition, there are non-state matching contributions toward the construction, operation and management costs.

In addition to the above funds, the County has spent over \$26,000 on consultant services to assist with preparing the final project plans and specifications.

CONSISTENCY WITH CONSERVANCY'S ENABLING LEGISLATION:

The proposed project is consistent with Chapter 9 of Division 21 of the Public Resources Code (Sections 31400-31410), regarding public access and enjoyment of coastal resources. Section 31400 states that the Conservancy shall have a principal role in the implementation of a system of public accessways to and along the state's coastline. Through the proposed project, the Conservancy will help enhance a coastal accessway and thereby improve access to and enjoyment of coastal resources along the San Luis Obispo coast.

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. With its location adjacent to the popular town and beaches of Avila Beach, the proposed project will enhance access along the coast for visitors from throughout the region and beyond.

Section 31400.2 requires the Conservancy to consider a number of factors in determining the amount of funding for an access project. Consistent with this section, the proposed level of funding was evaluated relative to the total amount of funding available to the Conservancy for coastal access projects, the fiscal resources of the applicant, and the Conservancy's project selection criteria (see Consistency with Conservancy's Project Selection Criteria & Guidelines). The County of San Luis Obispo has committed to provide funds needed to complete this

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project, as well as the funds necessary to operate and manage the proposed coastal park; however, the county does not have sufficient funds available to complete the project without assistance.

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 enhancing public access in a heavily visited coastal region.

CONSISTENCY WITH CONSERVANCY'S ACCESS PROGRAM STANDARDS:

Standard No. 1, Protect Public and Coastal Resources: Consistent with Standard No. 1, the proposed project will be located to safely accommodate public use and will be designed to minimize alteration of natural landforms, protect environmentally sensitive habitats, and be subordinate to the setting's character.

Standard No. 2, Correct Hazards: Consistent with Standard No. 2, the management and construction of the proposed access improvements will serve to correct or minimize potential hazards.

Standard No. 8, Trails: Consistent with Standard No. 8, the parking and trail connections will be established on ocean front parcels, avoid wherever feasible geologically unstable and erosive soils, and include appropriate paving materials, adequate drainage, trash receptacles, barriers, and signs.

Standard No. 9, Scenic Overlooks: Consistent with Standard No. 9, the project includes development of a scenic overlook that will be accessible to those with physical disabilities.

Standard No. 12, Support Facilities: Consistent with Standard No. 12, the proposed project will include signs, trash receptacles, and bike security racks.

Standard No. 13, Barrier-Free Access: Consistent with Standard No. 13, the proposed project will include several accessible parking spaces and an accessible scenic overlook.

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

Consistent with **Goal 2, Objective D** of the Conservancy's 2018-2022 Strategic Plan, the project entails the construction of new facilities, including improved parking, to enhance coastal recreational opportunities and enable people to enjoy natural, cultural, and historical resources.

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:

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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:** Constructing public access facilities serves to promote and implement state Coastal Act policies as follows:
 - **Coastal Act (1976), Public Resources Code Section 30210** on public access and recreation calls for "maximum access, which shall be conspicuously posted, and recreational opportunities shall be provided for all the people consistent with public safety needs and the need to protect public rights, rights of private property owners, and natural resource areas from overuse." The proposed project is consistent with this section in that it improve and enhance safe public access to the bluffs at the project site while protecting private property owner rights and natural resource areas from overuse. The County of San Luis Obispo will be responsible for posting and operating the park in a manner that is consistent with this section.
 - **Coastal Act (1976), Public Resources Code Section 30240** on environmentally sensitive habitat areas states that "environmentally sensitive habitat areas shall be protected against any significant disruption of habitat values, and only uses dependent on those resources shall be allowed within those areas," and "development in areas adjacent to environmentally sensitive habitat areas and parks and recreation areas shall be sited and designed to prevent impacts which would significantly degrade those areas, and shall be compatible with the continuance of those habitat and recreation areas." The proposed access improvements will be constructed consistent with this section.
4. **Support of the public:** The project has broad support of the public, public agencies and elected officials as demonstrated by the letters attached as Exhibit 4.
5. **Location:** The proposed project would be located within the coastal zone of San Luis Obispo County.
6. **Need:** Without Conservancy funds the County would not have sufficient funding to undertake the project at this time.
7. **Greater-than-local interest:** The surrounding areas of Avila Beach and Port San Luis Harbor attracts visitors from throughout the state, the country and abroad, many of whom seek to access and enjoy the region's coastline and beaches.
8. **Sea level rise vulnerability:** The project site will be located at approximately 160 feet above mean sea level and will not be vulnerable to sea level rise foreseeable future.

Additional Criteria:

9. **Leverage:** See the "Project Financing" section above.
10. **Readiness:** The County is ready to initiate the project pending Conservancy funding.

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11. **Realization of prior Conservancy goals:** See “Project History” above.
12. **Cooperation:** The County has invested substantial staff time soliciting community feedback on the project, including from the local citizen advisory council and nonprofit groups. Extensive tribal consultation has resulted in their formal support for the project.

CEQA COMPLIANCE:

The proposed access improvement project is categorically exempt under the California Environmental Quality Act (CEQA) pursuant to 14 California Code of Regulations (CCR), section 15301, because it involves operation, repair, and maintenance of existing public facilities that involves negligible or no expansion of existing or former use. The project is also categorically exempt from CEQA under 14 CCR section 15302, as it entails the replacement or reconstruction of existing structures or facilities on the same site and will have same purpose and capacity as the existing structures.

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