

COASTAL CONSERVANCY

Staff Recommendation  
September 22, 2022

**FITCH MOUNTAIN PUBLIC ACCESS IMPROVEMENTS: AUGMENTATION**

Project No. 13-002-03  
Project Manager: Michael Bowen

**RECOMMENDED ACTION:** Authorization to disburse \$1,500,000 to the City of Healdsburg to construct the public access improvements described in the Fitch Mountain Park and Open Space Preserve Management Plan in Healdsburg, Sonoma County.

**LOCATION:** Healdsburg, Sonoma County

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EXHIBITS

- Exhibit 1: [Project Location Map](#)  
Exhibit 2: [May 24, 2018 staff recommendation for the Fitch Mountain Public Access Improvement Project](#)  
Exhibit 3: [Project Letters](#)
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**RESOLUTION AND FINDINGS**

Staff recommends that the State Coastal Conservancy adopt the following resolution and findings.

Resolution:

The State Coastal Conservancy hereby authorizes a grant of an amount not to exceed one million five hundred thousand dollars (\$1,500,000) to augment the Conservancy's previously approved grant of \$150,000 to the City of Healdsburg ("the grantee") to construct the Phase A public access improvements described in the Fitch Mountain Park and Open Space Preserve Management Plan ("Plan") and to expand the project to include construction of the Phase B public access improvements described in the Plan.

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.
4. Evidence that all permits and approvals required to implement the project have been obtained.

Findings:

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

1. The proposed authorization is consistent with Chapter 4.5 of Division 21 of the Public Resources Code, regarding the San Francisco Bay Area Conservancy Program.
2. The proposed project is consistent with the current Conservancy Project Selection Criteria.

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## **STAFF RECOMMENDATION**

### **PROJECT SUMMARY:**

Staff recommends the Conservancy authorize the disbursement of \$1,500,000 to the City of Healdsburg ("City") to construct the public access improvements, both Phases A and B, of the Fitch Mountain Park and Open Space Preserve Management Plan ("Plan") for Fitch Mountain in Healdsburg, Sonoma County (Exhibit 1). This will augment the \$150,000 grant that the Conservancy authorized on May 24, 2018 for construction of the Phase A public access improvements.

The project, situated on a 173-acre property acquired by the City of Healdsburg for public access purposes, is described in the attached May 24, 2018 staff recommendation (Exhibit 2). The project consists of development and enhancement of public access improvements at the Fitch Mountain Park and Open Space Preserve ("the Preserve"). The Preserve currently has no public access infrastructure except for an unpaved road and a small number of trails. Little public access to open space exists in Sonoma County immediately adjacent to the Highway 101 corridor and along the Russian River. This project offers an opportunity to serve both those who reside in or visit the Healdsburg area, as well as those who are simply passing through and seek an opportunity to enjoy a short hike and sweeping vistas of the Russian River and surrounding valleys.

The project also presents an excellent opportunity to cooperate with the City and LandPaths, a non-profit that has been involved in stewardship of the Preserve, to introduce currently underserved residents to new recreational opportunities in Sonoma County. The new facilities will enhance public access opportunities for traditionally underserved sectors of the public, as well as local residents and visitors who currently enjoy the site.

The project, formerly divided into Phases A and B, now combined, includes the following elements:

- Parking Lot Improvements
- Trailhead and picnic area with benches and picnic tables
- Connector trail with wooden footbridge to access the Preserve

- Erosion Control
- Drainage Enhancements
- Improvements at Pedestrian and Emergency Vehicle Access Points
- ADA Compliant Restroom
- ADA Compliant Walkway connecting the Preserve to Dog Park and Playground
- Dog Park Improvements
- Low Gradient Trail (Banana Slug Trail)
- Connector Trail to Riverview Site

When this project was originally presented to the Conservancy, the City intended to implement Phase A separately from Phase B of the Plan in 2018-2019. The Conservancy awarded \$150,000 towards Phase A, and the City planned to complete the rest at an undetermined future time. The City postponed construction for more than a year due to staffing challenges, and then experienced unanticipated challenges and delays due to the global pandemic. Following several years of delay, and with sufficient funds and all necessary permits in place, the City is now prepared to complete both phases concurrently in the 2022-2023 construction season. The proposed augmentation of the grant will enable the City to complete the entire project.

**Site Description:** Fitch Mountain Preserve is a 173-acre property that encompasses the mountain's 991-foot peak and most of its surrounding slopes. It is one of the most prominent physical landmarks found in northern Sonoma County. The mountain lies in an unincorporated area, surrounded by the City of Healdsburg, and provides a scenic backdrop for the City and other communities along the Russian River. The heavily wooded mountain can be seen from a great distance in all directions, and it can be readily accessed from Highway 101 and downtown Healdsburg. The site has been used historically and unofficially by recreational hikers and other users for decades. Other surrounding land uses include residences on the south, east, and north, with the Villa Chanticleer, a popular Healdsburg city park, wedding facility, and conference center, to the west of the property.

**Grant Applicant Qualifications:** The City of Healdsburg is eminently qualified to advance the project. The City has a fulltime Parks and Recreation Department that oversees and administers all parks within the City's jurisdiction. City staff successfully managed a prior Conservancy grant for the access plan and exhibited administrative competence throughout the process. As property owner and grantee for the Plan, the City is the appropriate party to initiate and implement the long-term management and public access needs of the property described in the Plan. The City also possesses adequate staff resources to manage the improved property through their Parks Department.

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

The proposed project was found consistent with the Conservancy's 2014 Project Selection Criteria as described in the attached staff recommendation. It is also consistent with the more recent Project Selection Criteria, last updated on September 23, 2021, in the following respects:

**Selection Criteria**

- 1. Extent to which the project helps the Conservancy accomplish the objectives in the Strategic Plan.**

See the “Consistency with Conservancy’s Strategic Plan” section below.

**2. Project is a good investment of state resources.**

The project area is a highly popular public access amenity in need of access improvements to support the growing desire to utilize outdoor space. The site was acquired to facilitate public access, but access improvements languished for several years. The project is shovel ready and has a reasonable budget for the extensive access components.

The City has committed to covering all non-capital costs and any cost overruns associated with the project to ensure that their enhancement plan will be completed this year in entirety.

**3. Project includes a serious effort to engage tribes. Examples of tribal engagement include good faith, documented efforts to work with tribes traditionally and culturally affiliated to the project area.**

As part of the CEQA process, and prior to the Conservancy’s initial grant, the City of Healdsburg staff sent letters requesting consultation with California Tribes identified by the Native American Heritage Commission. The purpose of the letter was to inform the tribes of the proposed adoption of a Management Plan for the Preserve. No responses were received.

The City later launched in 2020 a more in-depth outreach process to better understand how to recognize and incorporate indigenous people’s history, contributions, and interests in development of the access improvements. As part of this effort, the City engaged Clint McKay, an enrolled member of the Dry Creek Rancheria Band of Pomo and Wappo Indians. Mr. McKay is the Indigenous Education Coordinator at Pepperwood Preserve in Santa Rosa and Vice-Chairperson of the Board of the California Indian Basketweavers’ Association. In working with Mr. McKay, the City has gained a better understanding of the importance of Fitch Mountain to indigenous peoples.

Discussions are underway concerning how to recognize this importance in the context of the Project. Current concepts include an interpretive signage program, incorporating cultural land management practices, and potentially recognizing indigenous peoples through naming site locations on the Preserve. Interpretive signage will be included as part of the project signage that the City will develop during construction in the fall and winter of 2022. Cultural land management practices are planned to be incorporated into future fire fuel reduction and natural resource management work, and the Healdsburg City Council is currently reviewing the City’s park and open space naming policy and expected to launch naming opportunities during the fall of 2022.

**4. Project benefits will be sustainable or resilient over the project lifespan.**

The grantee proposes durable capital improvements that are assured to last beyond the term of the grant agreement. The City’s Parks Department has a proven track record of maintenance for its facilities, as well.

**5. Project delivers multiple benefits and significant positive impact.**

The project’s multiple benefits were described in the prior staff recommendation. In addition, the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic has greatly increased the popularity of outdoor recreation and underscored the importance of accessible outdoor space.

Although Healdsburg is a highly affluent community, Sonoma County is on the forefront of ensuring that underserved and disadvantaged communities have access to the outdoors. Multiple programs offered by entities like the Sonoma Parks and Recreation Department, Landpaths, and others provide additional opportunities for the broader community to enjoy sites like Fitch Mountain.

Fitch Mountain presents a splendid opportunity to enhance a large park in a semi-urban/suburban environment for the benefit of visitors from within and outside the County.

**6. Project planned with meaningful community engagement and broad community support.**

As described in the prior staff recommendation, the City of Healdsburg launched an extensive public outreach process for the Project which culminated in the adoption of the Plan. The Preserve is a highly popular location within and outside of the community, and the excitement level is high for the proposed access improvements. Support letters are attached (Exhibit 3).

**PROJECT FINANCING**

<b>Coastal Conservancy</b>	<b>\$1,500,000</b>
Coastal Conservancy (Prior Grant)	\$150,000
City of Healdsburg	\$1,127,000
<b>Project Total</b>	<b>\$2,777,000</b>

The anticipated source of funding for the project is an allocation of General Fund to the Conservancy for environmental cleanup, water supply studies, and public access projects in the Eel River and Russian River watersheds, Budget Act of 2022, as amended by AB 178 (2022). Consistent with the funding source, the proposed project will construct public access improvements in Fitch Mountain Park and Open Space Preserve in the Russian River watershed.

The City of Healdsburg is providing significant funding to ensure timely completion of the Project.

Unless specifically identified as “Required Match,” the other sources of funding and in-kind contributions described above are estimates. The Conservancy does not typically require matching funds or in-kind services, nor does it require documentation of expenditures from other funders or of in-kind services. Typical grant conditions require grantees to provide any funds needed to complete a project.

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

The Project remains consistent with the Conservancy’s enabling legislation as described in Exhibit 2.

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

Consistent with **Goal 13, Objective B** of the Conservancy's 2018-2022 Strategic Plan, the proposed project will provide recreational facilities, parking, a restroom, a dog park, interpretive signage and other facilities for outdoor recreational enjoyment.

**CEQA COMPLIANCE:**

Prior to the May 24, 2018 board action, the Conservancy independently reviewed and considered the *Fitch Mountain Park and Open Space Preserve Management Plan Final Mitigated Negative Declaration* (MND) adopted by the City of Healdsburg on November 20, 2017, pursuant to the California Environmental Quality Act, which was attached to the May 24, 2018 staff recommendation as Exhibit 3. Staff also reviewed public comment on the MND, and the Mitigation Monitoring and Reporting Program. The Conservancy found that the project as designed and mitigated avoids, reduces, or mitigates the potentially significant environmental effects to a less-than-significant level, and that there is no substantial evidence based on the record as a whole that the project may have a significant effect on the environment, as defined in 14 Cal. Code Regulations Section 15382.

The project remains substantially unchanged from its description in the MND, and no new environmental information or change in circumstances requires a re-evaluation of the potential environmental effects of the project. 14 Cal. Code Regulations Section 15162(b). Accordingly, the proposed authorization remains consistent with the CEQA findings adopted by the Conservancy in connection with the May 24, 2018 authorization.