

COASTAL CONSERVANCY

Staff Recommendation
December 1, 2022

PETALUMA RIVER PARK PLANNING PROJECT

Project No. 22-084-01
Project Manager: Virgilio Cuasay

RECOMMENDED ACTION: Authorization to disburse up to \$1,395,800 to the Petaluma River Park Foundation for community engagement, park plan development, specific project designs, and environmental review associated with development of Petaluma River Park in Petaluma, Sonoma County.

LOCATION: Petaluma River Park, Petaluma, Sonoma County

EXHIBITS

- Exhibit 1: [Maps](#)
Exhibit 2: [Photos & Diagrams](#)
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 three hundred ninety-five thousand eight hundred dollars (\$1,395,800) to the Petaluma River Park Foundation (“the grantee”) for community engagement, park plan development, specific project designs, and environmental review associated with development of Petaluma River Park in Petaluma, Sonoma 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.

In addition, to the extent appropriate, the grantee shall incorporate into the project the guidelines of the Conservancy's 'Coastal Access Project Standards'.

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 San Francisco Bay Area Program.
2. The proposed Project is consistent with the current Conservancy Project Selection Criteria.
3. The Petaluma River Park Foundation is a nonprofit organization organized under section 501(c)(3) of the U.S. Internal Revenue Code.

STAFF RECOMMENDATION

PROJECT SUMMARY:

Staff recommends the Conservancy authorize a grant of up to \$1,395,800 to the Petaluma River Park Foundation (PRPF) for community engagement, park plan development, specific project designs, and environmental review associated with the Petaluma River Park (the Project) located in downtown Petaluma, Sonoma County. PRPF's mission is to plan and build the 24-acre Petaluma River Park with the goal of restoring and enhancing habitat, revitalizing urban waterfront, and creating high quality public recreational amenities on undeveloped land directly on the McNear Peninsula and near existing transit and trail facilities, and to develop the Project in an equitable way. To that end, the proposed project consists of producing the following documents for the Project: (1) a Vision and Concept Plan for both restoration and public access, developed through a community engagement process; (2) an Equitable Development Plan that considers community needs; (3) park schematic designs; (4) specific park component designs, and relevant permit applications for use during a later construction phase; and (4) environmental review documents for consistency with the California Environmental Quality Act.

The Project will take place in the heart of downtown Petaluma on the McNear Peninsula (see Exhibit 1). Although the City designated a 24-acre portion of the peninsula as public park space in its 1961 General Plan, the land sat idle and became overrun with invasive species and closed to surrounding communities until its acquisition by PRPF in 2020. Petaluma is home to a diverse community of residents who currently lack equitable and inclusive access to shoreline spaces. All major parks in the city are situated near its outskirts (Exhibit 1) and only accessible by car, leaving neighborhoods in the urban core park-poor.

To meet this need, PRPF formed in 2019 with the goal of adapting this 24-acre undeveloped parcel (the Property) in the City's waterfront district into an inclusive community outdoor recreational space. With support from the community, PRPF raised \$1.3 million in private funds to acquire the Property and launched the Project through a multiphase approach.

Phase 1 is complete and consisted of initial community visioning, property acquisition, preliminary stakeholder engagement, and identification of potential public access and restoration goals. Specifically, PRPF developed conceptual plans for riverbank stabilization, wetland enhancement, and a foot bridge connecting the park to a planned Bay Area Ridge Trail segment on land directly to the north (Exhibits 1 and 2); and installed a public 1.3-mile wheelchair-accessible trail. Phase I also resulted in a Blueprint for Community Engagement, which provides a framework for how PRPF will share power with their stakeholders to advance project goals moving forward.

The proposed project will advance planning in Phases 2 and 3, as described below. Phase 4, the future final phase (not part of this authorization), will consist of park construction, restoration activities, advanced community engagement, and park programming.

Phase 2 consists of community engagement and conceptual planning for the overall park. PRFP will develop a Vision and Concept Plan that will outline options for physical and programmatic elements that address community needs, particularly from underserved communities; consider locations to improve access for nearby neighborhoods; and plan for siting the restoration elements that were conceptually developed in Phase I, such as tidal wetlands restoration, removal of historically-placed fill, creation of native marsh habitat that supports vegetation and wildlife, and bioengineered bank stabilization along steep banks. Restoration and stewardship elements will be further informed by a geomorphology study of the McNear Channel. Two early actions during Phase 2 will be to hire a Community Engagement Manager and to create a Park Activator Council (community leaders) to facilitate meaningful engagement and develop culturally appropriate programming. Decisions will be made by a leadership team consisting of PRPF staff and board, consultants, and a Community Advisory Council (community members). Both the Park Activator Council and the Community Advisory Council will be compensated for their time. Activities under Phase 2 are expected to begin in early 2023 and conclude by the mid-2024.

Phase 3 consists of completing an Equitable Development Plan (EDP), park schematic design, and specific project element designs, with accompanying cost estimates and environmental review. The design work will be to the level of detail needed to inform environmental review. Work under Phase 3 will begin with the EDP, which is needed because adjacent communities (Exhibit 1) are at high risk for displacement due to the potential increase in property values resulting from park development. PRPF leadership will work with the City of Petaluma, Sonoma County, and local nonprofits to outline a framework that will result in equitable benefits for Petaluma residents from park-related development. The EDP will specifically lay out economic benefits and create strategies to mitigate potential unintended effects such as economic, cultural, and physical displacement. Potential strategies may include workforce and business development, access improvements, and housing security. Work under Phase 3 is expected to begin by mid-2024 and conclude by mid-2025.

Site Description: Creation of the McNear Channel as an offshoot of the Petaluma River resulted in formation of the 34-acre McNear Peninsula. Originally part of a meander of the Petaluma River, the peninsula area was filled in the early 1900's when the river was straightened to facilitate river navigation. Dredge spoils used to create the channel were deposited to its south

side, creating a strip of uplands in the “v-shape” between the channel (to the north) and the Petaluma River (to the south); see Exhibit 1. Elevations ranging from five to just over 23 feet above sea level. The peninsula was originally used for grazing, but now contains the 9.7-acre City-managed Steamer Landing Park at its base, and the 24-acre Petaluma River Park property (Exhibit 2), which PRPF acquired in 2020. Existing amenities include the rustic David Yearsley River Heritage Center, and the aforementioned 1.3-mile wheelchair accessible trail. The site is adjacent to walkable, bikeable, transit-connected Downtown Petaluma near Highway 101, and near a segment of dedicated Bay Area Ridge Trail (Exhibit 1) that runs through neighborhoods southwest of the Peninsula. Site access is currently available through Steamer Landing Park to the west, but a bridge (Exhibit 2) connecting the north side of the park with land north of McNear Channel is included in early park concepts. The site is characterized by ruderal herbaceous vegetation, including annual grasses, star thistle, fennel and wild mustard. The shoreline consists of a narrow, steep shoreline band, with cord grass, bulrush, salt grass, and a narrow band of pickleweed.

The McNear Peninsula is adjacent to a significant concentration of low-income residents and communities of color. These communities average 80% of area median income (Exhibit 1). The neighborhood directly to the east consists of a population that’s 33% Hispanic (compared to the city average of 21%) while the area to the west is 6% Asian (compared to the city average of 4.4%). Areas of the peninsula have been utilized by the unhoused for tent sites in the past. Mutual aid interventions as well as the Mary Isaak Center Emergency Shelter have actively worked towards meeting the needs of the unhoused. Market factors, including local and regional housing deficits, have influenced neighborhood change for several years.

Grant Applicant Qualifications: The Petaluma River Park Foundation is a nonprofit 501(c)(3) organization that formed in 2019 with the intent of acquiring the project site to transform it into a public park. While new, PRPF executive staff have decades of combined experience in nonprofit management, project delivery, branding, and philanthropic campaigns. Its board consists of a diverse set of individuals who bring a range of cultures, backgrounds, and skills, including art, sustainability planning, and accounting to inform its decisions. The PRPF Board Treasurer Jorge Servin is a partner and Certified Public Accountant in the accounting firm of Hood & Strong, a nationally recognized leader in professional services for the not-for-profit sector. To help guide its decisions, the PRPF has consulted with industry professionals with experience in parks, placemaking, land and habitat conservation, and community engagement—professionals such as Greg Moore, formerly with the Golden Gate National Parks Conservancy, who has managed approximately ten major Conservancy grants. PRPF has secured and is managing a high value grant from the Sonoma County Agricultural Preservation and Open Space District that has been used towards preliminary resource assessments and site investigations. Remaining funds from Sonoma County Agricultural Preservation and Open Space District will be used for construction.

CONSISTENCY WITH CONSERVANCY’S PROJECT SELECTION CRITERIA:

The proposed project is consistent with the Conservancy’s 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.

Once implemented, the Project will contribute to revitalizing Petaluma’s waterfront district by providing an inclusive open space where visitors can learn about art, nature, and the land’s history. The Project will also satisfy the local need for open space in a park-poor, densely populated urban area of the city, offering surrounding communities the opportunity to recreate near their homes. Initial work, including fundraising for property acquisition, early community engagement, and preliminary trail construction has been accomplished within three years of the applicant’s formation and commencement of work, showing the Project is on track to complete its goals. While the Project has firm institutional and private support, it will also receive in-kind services valued at roughly \$100,000. Lastly, the Project is consistent with the City of Petaluma’s General Plan.

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.

PRPF staff have engaged in initial conversations with the Federated Indians of Graton Rancheria to discuss their interests in the park. Early topics have included cultural resources, cultural interpretation in the Park design, input on general Park development, including public access programs, and input on the habitat restoration plan to make sure culturally relevant plants are included in the plant palette.

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

The Petaluma River Park peninsula has average elevations of 14 feet above sea level and will not be severely impacted by sea level rise. In the event of extreme conditions, PRPF has asked its park design consultant to develop a set of options to consider as necessary adaptations for climate resilience. Included in the park’s goals is restoration of part of its habitat to tidal wetlands and marsh habitat that accommodates high flows and sea level rise. The native plant palette developed through this Project will account for high heat and drought scenarios and native oaks plantings will support carbon sequestration on the site.

5. Project delivers multiple benefits and significant positive impact.

The Project will deliver a long list of benefits including:

- Promote equitable access to shoreline recreation by developing the riverfront park using input gathered from local and regional residents representing all age groups and abilities, families, underserved communities, tribal members, and communities of color.

- Revitalizing Petaluma’s waterfront district by developing an urban recreational open space park that will provide nature, art, music, and community space opportunities that become a regional draw to the area, bolstering Sonoma County’s existing tourist count of approximately 7 million visitors per year.
- Enhancing and restoring existing upland and future wetland habitat using evidence-based approaches intended to serve as a model for riparian habitat restoration and riverbank stabilization.
- Partnering with organizations to deliver environmental education programs that will cultivate stewardship into the future.
- Providing inclusive access and amenities, including trails, restrooms, on-water facilities, and signage that are compliant with ADA standards for Accessible Design.
- Provide a compelling destination for travelers utilizing the Bay Area Water Trail and Bay Area Ridge Trail.

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

PRPF has ongoing relationships with the key local jurisdictions and stakeholders that will benefit from this Project, and these partners are deeply invested and involved in the Project development efforts to date. Early work on the Project was done by volunteers, advisors, supporters, and partners. One outcome of this preliminary work is the Community Engagement Blueprint, which provides the framework for stakeholder engagement and identifies a set of key community partners including the Downtown Streets Team, Sonoma Resource Conservation District, Daily Acts, North Bay Organizing Project, Sonoma Land Trust, Point Blue Conservation Science, Friends of the Petaluma River, the Petaluma Relations Council, Petaluma Arts Center, Petaluma Health Center, LandPaths, Petaluma Bounty, and Café Puente. As part of PRPF’s diversification efforts, their governing board was assembled to represent a range of cultures, backgrounds, and professions with 50% of its members identifying as people of color.

Community engagement will continue as part of the proposed project and will include community consultations and co-development that will result in key work products such as the Concept Plan. Included in this plan is a summary of community needs and desired recreational programming.

PROJECT FINANCING

Coastal Conservancy	\$1,395,800
Peter E. Haas Jr. Family Fund	\$593,753
*Sonoma County Agricultural Preservation and Open Space District	\$188,833
Individual donations	\$100,000
Project Total	\$2,278,386

Conservancy funding is anticipated to come from a Fiscal Year 2022/23 appropriation from the General Fund to the Conservancy for the purpose of climate resilience. (Budget Act 2022, SB 154). These funds are available as described in Section 52 of Chapter 258 of the Statutes of 2021, which sets forth a detailed description of the purposes of the climate resilience funds. The proposed project is consistent with this funding source because it is a project for the purpose of the San Francisco Bay Area Conservancy Program (Chapter 4.5 of Division 21 of the Government Code), as described further below.

Sonoma County Agricultural Preservation and Open Space District (SCAPOSD) funds noted in the table above represent funds dedicated to the planning phase of the Petaluma River Park project. Additional grant funds from SCAPOSD, not shown above, will be used for a future construction phase. The City of Petaluma will contribute \$30,000 of in-kind services towards initial CEQA expenses.

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:

Pursuant to Chapter 3, Section 31111 of the Public Resources Code, the Conservancy may fund and undertake plans and feasibility studies and may award grants to nonprofit organizations for these purposes. The recommended authorization is to grant funds to PRPF, a nonprofit grantee, to undertake planning for the Petaluma River Park.

The proposed project is consistent with the following provisions of Chapter 4.5 of Division 21 of the Public Resources Code, Sections 31162 et seq. regarding the San Francisco Bay Area Program, which states the Conservancy may undertake projects and award grants in the nine-county San Francisco Bay Area that will help achieve the following goals of the San Francisco Bay Area Conservancy Program:

- Section 31162(a) states that the Conservancy can undertake projects that improve public access to, within, and around the bay, coast, ridgetops, and urban open spaces, consistent with the rights of private property owners, and without having a significant adverse impact on agricultural operations and environmentally sensitive areas and wildlife. The proposed project will enable PRPF to plan for development and implementation of the Petaluma River Park, an urban open space within the San Francisco Bay Area.
- Section 31162(d) states that the Conservancy can undertake projects that promote, assist, and enhance projects that provide open space and natural areas that are accessible to urban populations for recreational and educational purposes. The proposed project will enable the Conservancy to assist the PRPF to plan and implement the Petaluma River Park for recreational and educational purposes for urban populations.

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

Consistent with **Goal 12, Objective E** of the Conservancy's 2018-2022 Strategic Plan, the proposed Project will develop plans for enhancement of riparian and riverine habitat or other watershed functions and processes for the benefit of wildlife or water quality.

Consistent with **Goal 13, Objective A** of the Conservancy's 2018-2022 Strategic Plan, the proposed Project will develop plans for projects that provide recreational facilities such as picnic areas and natural play spaces.

Consistent with **Goal 13, Objective H** of the Conservancy's 2018-2022 Strategic Plan, the proposed Project will create plans to connect regionally significant public trails and community connectors to the Bay Area Ridge Trail.

CEQA COMPLIANCE:

The proposed project is exempt from the California Environmental Quality Act (CEQA) pursuant to the CEQA Guidelines at California Code of Regulations, Title 14, Sections 15262, which exempts feasibility and planning studies for possible future actions from the requirement to prepare an Environmental Impact Report or negative declaration, and 15306, which exempts basic data collection, research, and resource evaluation activities that will not disturb environmental resources. The proposed project consists of planning activities, preparation of designs, and review of environmental effects, none of which will impact any environmental resources and all of which will be undertaken for possible future actions that the Conservancy has not yet approved, adopted, or funded.

Staff will file a Notice of Exemption upon approval of this Project.