

COASTAL CONSERVANCY

Staff Recommendation

February 15, 2024

SONOMA SCHELLVILLE TRAIL ACQUISITION

Project No. 23-068-01

Project Manager: Virgilio Cuasay

RECOMMENDED ACTION: Authorization to disburse up to \$600,000 to Sonoma County Regional Parks to acquire approximately 20 acres of non-active railway corridor to complete acquisition of ownership of lands needed to enable future construction of the Sonoma Schellville Trail, Sonoma County.

LOCATION: Along 8th Street East, between East Napa Street and Highways 12/121, near the City of Sonoma in unincorporated Sonoma County

EXHIBITS

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

Exhibit 2: [Photos](#)

Exhibit 3: [Project Letters](#)

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 six hundred thousand dollars (\$600,000) to Sonoma County Regional Parks to acquire 19 parcels of non-active railway corridor totaling approximately 20-acres (“Property”) in unincorporated Sonoma County (including Sonoma County’s Assessor’s Parcel Nos. 128-431-013, 128-381-059, 128-381-049 two portions, 128-041-015, 127-302-029, and 128-042-041 and additional undesignated tracts lying adjacent to and below Eighth Street East from East Napa Street south to SMART’s holdings in Schellville) as depicted in Exhibit 1 to the accompanying staff recommendation for purposes of a public trail currently designated as the Sonoma Schellville Trail. This authorization is subject to the following conditions:

1. Prior to the disbursement of funds for the acquisition, the grantee shall submit for the review and approval of the Executive Officer of the Conservancy (“Executive Officer”):

- a. All relevant acquisition documents for the acquisition including, without limitation, the appraisal, purchase and sale agreement, deed, escrow instructions, environmental and hazardous materials assessment, and title report;
 - b. A baseline conditions report; and
 - c. Evidence that sufficient funds are available to complete the acquisition.
2. The grantee shall pay no more than fair market value for the Property, as established in an appraisal approved by the Executive Officer.
 3. The Property shall be managed, operated, and used for protection of open space and habitat and for providing public access, including a trail. The Property shall be permanently dedicated to those purposes through an appropriate instrument approved by the Executive Officer.
 4. Conservancy funding shall be acknowledged by erecting and maintaining a sign on the Property or in a nearby publicly viewable area, the design and location of which are to be approved by the Executive Officer.

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 Program.
2. The proposed project is consistent with the current Conservancy Project Selection Criteria.

STAFF RECOMMENDATION

PROJECT SUMMARY:

Staff recommends the Conservancy disburse up to \$600,000 to Sonoma County Regional Parks (SCRP) to acquire 19 parcels of non-active railway corridor totaling approximately 20 acres in unincorporated Sonoma County for the purpose of completing the Sonoma Schellville Trail, which is planned to connect the communities of Sonoma and Schellville along an abandoned railroad corridor. The subject parcels comprise four non-contiguous sections that run along 8th Street East (just east and south of the City of Sonoma) that will collectively enable future construction of an approximately four-mile trail from Napa Street East, south to Highways 12 and 121 in Schellville. The "Proposed Sonoma-Schellville Location Map" in Exhibit 1, Figure 2 depicts the four sections in red (called out as the "Union Pacific Proposed Acquisitions").

The Sonoma Schellville Trail is a high priority project identified in multiple local and regional plans including the Sonoma County General Plan 2020, the Sonoma County Bicycle and Pedestrian Plan 2010, and the Sonoma County Transportation Authority Measure M Strategic Plan. Its south end will connect to a planned segment of the San Francisco Bay Trail, and its north end connects to a series of existing and planned bike paths (the Sonoma and Central Sonoma Valley Bike Paths, and the planned Sonoma Valley Trail) that will eventually connect

Schellville to Santa Rosa. See Exhibit 1, Figure 3. This acquisition will enable SCRCP to provide a Class I off-road trail and bike path, serving non-motorized transportation and recreation needs and connecting the community to dozens of places of employment, residences, and destinations; it will also preserve open space and protect existing habitat from other, potentially more dense forms of development. See the “Project delivers multiple benefits and significant positive impact” section below for additional detail about project purpose.

Since the mid-1980’s, SCRCP has been investigating then negotiating the possible acquisition of this railroad right-of-way, and reached agreement with the sellers in March 2023. Sonoma County Agricultural Preservation and Open Space District will contribute acquisition funds and hold an easement; SCRCP will develop the trail, including working with relevant transportation agencies to design the necessary crossing of Highway 12/121 and an active rail corridor, and maintain it.

Site Description: The Interstate Commerce Commission approved the abandonment of the Union Pacific railway line between Sebastiani Winery (now the end of the Sonoma City Trail) and Schellville on June 11, 1986. The property to be acquired constitutes 19 parcels consisting of portions of this abandoned railway corridor (Exhibit 2, Figure 1) and sections of the 8th Street East public right-of-way within an unincorporated area of Sonoma County to the east and south of the city limits of Sonoma. These parcels make up four non-contiguous pieces (collective length of 3.1 miles) that will connect to existing easements, a trailhead, a corridor holding, an offer-to-dedicate trail easement, and a future trail easement (in active negotiation) to enable future construction of the four-mile Sonoma Schellville Trail. See maps in Exhibit 1.

The corridor is generally flat and connects two urban services areas, Sonoma and Schellville. Several businesses are along the corridor including an airport, a post office, wineries, wine and brewery supporting industries, visitor-supporting services, warehouses, manufacturing facilities, office space, storage facilities, and delis. There are also active agricultural areas between developed areas (Exhibit 2, Figure 2), as well as grasslands, croplands, and greenbelt; the corridor crosses Schell Creek (Exhibit 2, Figure 3), riparian habitat (Exhibit 2, Figure 4), and a priority area for wildlife habitat and movement.

Grant Applicant Qualifications: SCRCP has an established history of working with multiple partners, including the Conservancy, on grant-funded projects for the acquisition, planning, and construction of new parks and trails. Examples of successfully completed projects using a variety of public and private grants include the Guerneville River Park Phase 2 which provided Russian River access; the Helen Putnam Regional Park renovation which improved trails for all-season use, wildflower and oak regeneration management, and way finding and interpretive signs; the 120-acre Cougar Mountain addition to Hood Mountain Regional Park & Preserve; and the West County Trail community connection which provided 0.12 mile of Class 1 trail and trailhead.

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.

The proposed project will permanently secure property necessary to complete a four-mile trail that will provide active transportation and recreation along a safe bike and pedestrian route, link to regional and countywide trail systems such as the San Francisco Bay Trail, and implement access/recreation recommendations in multiple regional plans.

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

SCRCP commits to maintaining the property and trail, thereby ensuring the benefits (see #4 below) are sustainable and resilient.

4. Project delivers multiple benefits and significant positive impact.

The proposed project will deliver multiple benefits including: (1) enabling development of a regional trail (see #1 above) that connects two urban service areas (Sonoma and Schellville); (2) creating active transportation that will reduce air pollution and greenhouse gas emissions, and provide health benefits from being physically active walking, biking, or rolling to destinations; (3) providing mobility options for those who cannot drive; (4) improving neighborhood livability with increased interactions among trail users; (5) protecting existing habitat from other, potentially more dense forms of development on the corridor; (6) creating the opportunity for SCRCP to conduct future restoration activities such as riparian enhancement along Schell Creek at the southern end of the corridor, slowing runoff, and increasing groundwater recharge in infiltration bio-swales.

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

Following acquisition of the property, SCRCP will reach out to the surrounding community, businesses, stakeholders, and organizations for input during the design and environmental review of trail development. Outreach will be conducted in English and in Spanish. The project is supported by multiple local and regional organizations (see Exhibit 3).

PROJECT FINANCING

Coastal Conservancy	\$600,000
Sonoma County Agricultural Preservation and Open Space District	1,000,000
Sonoma County Regional Parks	539,900
Sonoma County Transportation Authority	550,000
Sonoma County Regional Parks Foundation	10,000
Project Total	\$2,699,900

Conservancy funds are anticipated to come from an FY 2022/23 appropriation from the General Fund to the Conservancy for “urgent sea level adaptation and coastal resilience needs using nature-based solutions or other strategies.” (The Budget Act of 2022, SB 154 as amended by the Budget Act of 2023, SB 101). 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, including projects for the purpose of the San Francisco Bay Area Conservancy Program. The proposed project is consistent with this funding source because it is within the San Francisco Bay Area Conservancy Program established pursuant to Chapter 4.5 of Division 21 of the Public Resources Code.

Sonoma County Regional Parks is providing funds towards the purchase price as well as pre-acquisition costs. The Sonoma County Parks Foundation is providing funds towards closing costs.

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 proposed project is being undertaken pursuant to Chapter 4.5 of Division 21 of the Public Resources Code. Section 31162 authorizes the Conservancy to undertake projects in the nine-county San Francisco Bay Area to help achieve regional public access and resource goals.

The proposed authorization is consistent with Section 31162(a) because the proposed project is located within the nine-county Bay Area (in Sonoma County), and it will help achieve the San Francisco Bay Area Conservancy Program goal of improving public access to and around the Bay, without having a significant adverse impact on agricultural operations and environmentally sensitive areas and wildlife (through the planned development of the Sonoma Schellville Trail).

Consistent with Section 31162(b), the proposed authorization will enable protecting an open space and trail corridor of regional importance.

Consistent with Section 31162(d), the proposed authorization will promote, assist, and enhance development of a trail that will connect communities to open space and natural areas (e.g., connects to the San Francisco Bay Trail that affords direct shoreline access) that are accessible to urban populations (in this case, the nearby City of Sonoma) for recreational purposes (the trail itself is a recreational amenity).

CONSISTENCY WITH CONSERVANCY’S 2023-27 STRATEGIC PLAN GOAL(S) & OBJECTIVE(S):

Consistent with **Goal 3.1 Conserve Lands**, the proposed project will protect public access properties.

CEQA COMPLIANCE:

The project is categorically exempt from environmental review under the California Environmental Quality Act (CEQA) pursuant to Cal. CA Pub Res Code § 21080.28, which exempts acquisitions of property for restoration of natural conditions, including plant and animal habitats as specified in subsection (a)(1)(B) and for park purposes as specified in subsection (a)(1)(F). The proposed project will protect the property for future restoration and riparian enhancement along the Southern end of the corridor and completion of the Sonoma Schellville Trail. Although physical changes in the land are a reasonably foreseeable consequence of the acquisition, SCRIP will comply with CEQA before any authorizing physical changes to the land.

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