SAN FRANCISCO BAY RESTORATION AUTHORITY

Staff Recommendation
June 24, 2022

BAYLANDS HABITAT RESTORATION AND COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT IN EAST PALO ALTO

Project No. RA-034
Project Manager: Virgilio Cuasay

RECOMMENDED ACTION: Authorization to disburse up to $688,016 to Grassroots Ecology to restore and enhance marsh-upland transition zone habitat along the San Francisco Bay Trail in Ravenswood Open Space Preserve and at Cooley Landing, work with East Palo Alto-based community groups to provide restoration training and organize stewardship events, and hire local young adults for restoration internships in San Mateo County.

LOCATION: East Palo Alto, San Mateo County; Measure AA Region: West Bay

MEASURE AA PROGRAM CATEGORY: Safe, Clean Water and Pollution Prevention Program; Vital Fish, Bird and Wildlife Habitat Program; Shoreline Public Access Program.

EXHIBITS

Exhibit 1: Project Location and Overview Maps

Exhibit 2: Project Designs, Photographs, and Plant List

Exhibit 3: Project Letters

RESOLUTION AND FINDINGS

Staff recommends that the San Francisco Bay Restoration Authority adopt the following resolution and findings:

Resolution:

The San Francisco Bay Restoration Authority hereby authorizes the disbursement of an amount not to exceed six hundred eighty-eight thousand sixteen dollars ($688,016) to Grassroots Ecology to restore and enhance marsh-upland transition zone habitat along the San Francisco Bay Trail in Ravenswood Open Space Preserve and at Cooley Landing, work with East Palo Alto-based community groups to provide restoration training and organize stewardship events, and hire local young adults for restoration internships in San Mateo County. Prior to commencement of the project, the grantee shall submit for the review and written approval of the Executive Officer of the Authority 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 Authority funding.
4. Evidence that all permits and approvals required to implement the project have been obtained.
5. Evidence that the grantee has entered into an agreement with the Midpeninsula Regional Open Space District sufficient to enable the grantee to implement, operate, and maintain the project.

Findings:

Based on the accompanying staff recommendation and attached exhibits, the San Francisco Bay Restoration Authority hereby finds that:

1. The proposed authorization is consistent with The San Francisco Bay Restoration Authority Act, Gov. Code Sections 66700-66706.
2. The proposed authorization is consistent with The San Francisco Bay Clean Water, Pollution Prevention and Habitat Restoration Measure (Measure AA).

STAFF RECOMMENDATION

PROJECT SUMMARY:

Staff recommends that the Authority authorize a grant of up to $688,016 to Grassroots Ecology for the Baylands Habitat Restoration and Community Engagement in East Palo Alto project ("the project") in San Mateo County (Exhibit 1). The project consists of restoring and enhancing marsh-upland transition zone habitat along the San Francisco Bay Trail (Bay Trail) in Ravenswood Open Space Preserve (OSP) and at the adjacent Cooley Landing Park.

Situated on land that was formerly used as a salt production pond, as well as a municipal dump, the project site is now slowly being restored to marshland through efforts led by Midpeninsula Regional Open Space District (Midpen), which owns the land, the City of East Palo Alto, and partners such as the community-based organization Climate Resilient Communities (CRC). Beginning with a levee breach to restore tidal marsh in 2000, the area has since been transformed into an open space preserve and a recreational park. A key segment of Bay Trail was constructed in 2016 through Ravenswood Marsh, making the OSP an increasingly popular destination for visitors. Non-native invasive plants such as mustard and Russian thistle dominate the transition zone habitat, which is also home to federally- and state-listed endangered species, such as the Ridgway's rail. Adjacent to the project site are residential communities, consisting primarily of people of color, that have historically suffered from industrial pollution and limited access to green space.

Grassroots Ecology is proposing a restoration effort at the Ravenswood OSP and Cooley Landing sites that will increase biodiversity, build a resilient marsh transition zone habitat, and reduce the local community's climate and economic burdens. There are three components to this project: (1) habitat restoration, (2) workforce development, and (3) community engagement.

- The habitat restoration component consists of invasive plant removal and native plant revegetation along 1.3 miles of Bay Trail alignment and a section of Cooley Landing (Exhibit 1) for up to 3 acres total. Invasive plant removal will include manually removing Russian thistle, black mustard, Italian thistle, smilo grass, Algerian sea lavender, ice plant, stinkwort, and fennel; and applying chemical treatments for perennial pepperweed and fennel as needed. Native plant revegetation will involve growing and planting a diverse selection of up to 3,000 native plants (Exhibit 2) grown at Grassroots Ecology's nearby nursery and direct seeding on up to 2,400 linear feet of the project site.
- The workforce development component involves hiring local youth as paid restoration interns. Throughout a 12-week span, interns will be trained by Grassroots Ecology staff and industry professionals to install and maintain native plants, implement integrated plant management, and manage critical endangered species habitat.
- The community engagement component will be implemented by Grassroots Ecology's project partner, CRC. CRC will work directly with the local East Palo Alto community and through its network of community-based organizations to develop a connection with Ravenswood OSP and Cooley Landing to encourage stewardship of these lands. CRC will hold seminars on environmental topics, lead habitat restoration and stewardship events, and provide stipends to those who participate in stewardship and leadership training.

Restoring the transition zone will provide numerous benefits to human and wildlife communities that reside in or near the project area. Replacing non-native invasive plants with native plants will improve habitat for local wildlife and enhance the recreational experience of people who visit the project site. Habitat restoration will also help ensure that the portion of the Bay Trail in Ravenswood Marsh remains in usable condition.

Given the seasonality of habitat restoration, Grassroots Ecology strategically takes advantage of periods in which rainfall naturally increases the ability for plants to establish themselves. However, prolonged droughts that are increasingly occurring make such an approach difficult. Grassroots Ecology has planned for such droughts by budgeting for irrigation if needed. Grassroots Ecology will also follow official state and local guidelines to reduce health risks related to pandemics.

Grassroots Ecology's mission is to leverage the power of the community to create healthy ecosystems across Silicon Valley, from the foothills to San Francisco Bay. They engage 11,000 youth and adults annually to protect and improve eight Silicon Valley watersheds in ten cities and two counties, Santa Clara and San Mateo. Working together with public and partner agencies, Grassroots Ecology restores riparian habitats and natural lands, reduces, monitors, and prevents water pollution, enhances water conservation and stormwater capture, and preserves local biodiversity.

Grassroots Ecology and CRC are well qualified to carry out this project, the core of which is based on developing community support and capacity through strong public/private partnerships. Grassroots Ecology has a long and successful history of working at this site with the City of East Palo Alto and Midpen. CRC, which has deep ties to the local East Palo Alto community, will help provide a level of community engagement that would be difficult to achieve without their involvement.

Site Description: Once a salt production pond, the land that makes up what is now known as Ravenswood OSP was purchased by Midpen in 1981. Efforts to restore the area to marshland began in 2000 after a planned levee breach to reintroduce bay waters. Adjacent to the Ravenswood OSP to the south is Cooley Landing Park, a 9-acre peninsula operated by the City of East Palo Alto (ownership is divided between Midpen and the City of East Palo Alto). After 25 years as a municipal dump, Cooley Landing was restored and opened to the public in 2012. Together, Ravenswood OSP and Cooley Landing offer 385 acres of tidal marsh and upland habitat along the San Francisco Bay shoreline and serve as vital open space to the local communities of East Palo Alto. While efforts to restore the area's marsh habitat have largely been successful, its marsh-upland transition zone is overrun by non-native plants such as Russian thistle and fennel, and would benefit from the work proposed in this project. (See Exhibit 2)

PROJECT FINANCING

San Francisco Bay Restoration Authority	$ 688,016
Others:	
City of East Palo Alto	$6,000
Whale Tail grant from Coastal Commission	$10,000
Packard Foundation	$10,000
Bohannon Foundation	$5,000
Johnson Foundation	$5,000
Individual donations to Grassroots Ecology	$9,865
Project Total	**$733,881**

Grassroots Ecology has secured a total of $81,550 in-kind donations. $20,000 of that total will come from Midpen for staff time spent securing permits and for work on targeted invasive plant integrated pest management. Midpen will also pay $31,600 for container plants, seed, and straw. The remaining $29,950 will come from volunteer hours.

CONSISTENCY WITH AUTHORITY'S ENABLING LEGISLATION, THE SAN FRANCISCO BAY RESTORATION AUTHORITY ACT:

The project is consistent with Government Code Section 66704.5 of the Authority's Enabling Legislation, and therefore is eligible for grant funding from the Authority. Grassroots Ecology is a 501(c)(3) nonprofit organization, which is an eligible grantee under Section 66704.5(a). The project will occur along the shoreline adjacent to East Palo Alto in San Mateo County, which is within the Authority's jurisdiction. The project will restore and enhance natural habitat on the San Francisco Bay shoreline and improve public access and recreational amenities in the project area, making it an eligible project as defined in Section 66704.5(b). Funding this habitat

restoration and public access project is consistent with Section 66704.5(e), which allows the Authority to award grants for all phases of construction of eligible projects.

CONSISTENCY WITH MEASURE AA PROGRAMS AND ACTIVITIES:

The proposed project is consistent with the programs and activities of Measure AA, as outlined below:

The project would support the *Safe, Clean Water and Pollution Prevention Program'*s purpose of providing clean water for fish, birds, wildlife and people through restoration of the marsh-upland transition zone that provides natural filtration and removes pollution from water entering the Bay.

The project would support the *Vital Fish, Bird and Wildlife Habitat Program'*s purpose to significantly improve wildlife habitat, by restoring wetlands and other Bay and shoreline habitats to benefit shorebirds, waterfowl, and fish.

The project would support the *Shoreline Public Access Program'*s purpose to enhance the quality of life of Bay Area residents through improved public access, by helping to maintain a portion of the Bay Trail in usable condition and enhancing the experience of recreational users in the project area.

CONSISTENCY WITH MEASURE AA PRIORITIZATION CRITERIA:

1. **Greatest positive impact.** The project will restore and enhance natural habitats along the shoreline of the Ravenswood OSP and Cooley Landing, as well as a newly connected segment of the Bay Trail. These habitats provide breeding grounds and refuge to sensitive marsh species during high tides and help mitigate flood risk. The project will empower people from local historically underrepresented communities to become invested in this restoration effort by inspiring and training residents to become stewards of their local coastal resources. Lastly, improvements to the project area will benefit visitors to the OSP and trail alignments, which have seen recent upticks in usage, by giving visitors access to a landscape with increased aesthetic value.

2. **Greatest long-term impact.** This project is designed to strengthen East Palo Alto's ability to adapt to climate change through building both community and climate resilience. It accomplishes this goal by increasing capacity for coastal land stewardship through partnerships between the public and community groups. This collaborative arrangement empowers community leaders to take an active role in protecting the Bay to benefit current and future generations. Finally, this project will open career pathways in the environmental field to local youth through paid internships and training opportunities.

3. **Leveraging resources and partnerships.** The project leverages partnerships in several ways. Within the community-based element, Grassroots Ecology is relying on their existing relationship with CRC, which has strong ties with community-based organizations such as Anamatagi Polynesian Voices, St. Marks Church, Nuestra Casa, and Oxford Day Academy (Exhibit 3), to engage and empower local community members. Long-standing partnerships

with Midpen and the City of East Palo Alto provide Grassroots Ecology with institutional support. Midpen will handle CEQA compliance and permitting and provide technical assistance.

4. **Economically disadvantaged communities.** East Palo Alto's local population consists largely of working-class people of color who have historically faced socioeconomic inequities and borne the brunt of environmental burdens. Cost of living increases brought on by the City's proximity to the greater Silicon Valley tech industry have increased the local community's burdens. This project attempts to address these historic inequities by providing workforce development opportunities in the environmental field to disadvantaged youth, restore habitat that enhances climate resilience, and increase access to the Bay Trail and open space.

5. **Benefits to economy.** The project is designed to strengthen the economy by training people from the local community to become skilled at sustainable land management. The benefits of this approach are three-fold. First, the local workforce is connected to job training opportunities that can be difficult to obtain. Second, the training program will help satisfy industry-wide demand for a diverse and skilled workforce. And third, developing the local workforce and fiscally supporting community groups for stewardship events will keep money within the community.

6. **Engage youth and young adults.** The project will engage local youth and young adults to develop skills and opportunities in natural resource protection through internships, restoration training, and stewardship events. Internships will prioritize community college students and first-generation immigrants. San Jose Conservation Corps, consisting primarily of Black, Indigenous, and people of color (BIPOC) youth, will have opportunities to participate in planned workdays as part of a larger training program for sustainable land management.

7. **Monitoring, maintenance, and stewardship.** Annual vegetation monitoring for the habitat restoration element, visual surveys for invasive plant populations with a target of less than 10% invasive cover within active planting zones, and seasonal bird surveys at the transition zone will be used to monitor the project's success. Annual surveys will inform adjustments to the project as needed.

8. **Coastal Conservancy's San Francisco Bay Area Conservancy Program.** The proposed project is consistent with the Conservancy's San Francisco Bay Area Conservancy Program's Criteria:
    a. The project is supported by adopted local/regional plans including elements of the San Francisco Bay Joint Venture Implementation Strategy for South Bay Subregion, Baylands Ecosystem Habitat Goals Science Update (2015), Comprehensive Conservation and Management Plan for the Estuary (also known as the Estuary Blueprint, 2016), the San Francisco Bay Trail Plan (1989), and San Francisco Bay Trail Design Guidelines & Toolkit (2016);

b. The project serves a regional constituency including users of the Bay Trail corridor which now spans 80 miles across Santa Clara, San Mateo, and Alameda Counties;
c. The project can also be implemented in a timely way, with completion of all tasks estimated for December 2024;
d. The project presents opportunities to protect public investment in the recently completed Ravenswood Bay Trail Connection Project, by managing fast-establishing invasive weeds and expanding functional transition zone habitat; and
e. The project includes matching funds from Midpen as well as individual donations and foundation support.

9. **San Francisco Bay Conservation and Development Commission's Coastal Management Program.** This project is consistent with several policies of BCDC's Coastal Management Program, San Francisco Bay Plan:
    a) Fish, Other Aquatic Organisms and Wildlife, Policy 1: To assure the benefits of wildlife for future generations, to the greatest extent feasible, the Bay's tidal marshes, tidal flats, and subtidal habitat should be conserved, restored and increased.
    b) Fish, Other Aquatic Organisms and Wildlife, Policy 2: Protection of native species including candidate, threatened, and endangered species, specifically by improving marsh transition zone habitat.
    c) Public Access, Policy 12: Federal, state, regional, and local jurisdictions, special districts, and the Commission should cooperate to provide appropriately sited, designed and managed public access, especially to link the entire series of shoreline parks, regional trail systems (such as the San Francisco Bay Trail) and existing public access areas.
    d) Environmental Justice and Social Equity, Policy 3: Equitable, culturally-relevant community outreach and engagement will be conducted by project applicants to meaningfully involve potentially impacted communities for appropriate minor projects in underrepresented and/or identified vulnerable and/or disadvantaged communities.

10. **San Francisco Bay Joint Venture's Implementation Strategy.** Based on consultation with San Francisco Bay Joint Venture (SFBJV) staff, the project would be consistent with SFBJV's Implementation Strategy, as it would:
    a) Contribute to the restoration of 16,000 acres of bay habitats and 1,000 acres of seasonal wetlands in the South Bay Subregion on public lands using non-regulatory techniques.
    b) Contribute to the enhancement of 42,000 acres of bay habitats and 4,000 acres of seasonal wetlands in the South Bay Subregion on public lands using non-regulatory techniques.

COMPLIANCE WITH CEQA:

The proposed project is categorically exempt from the California Environmental Quality Act (CEQA) under California Code of Regulations, Title 14, Section 15333, because the habitat restoration component of the project does not exceed five acres in size and is designed to assure the restoration and enhancement of habitat for fish, plants, and wildlife by revegetating disturbed areas with native plant species through the use of hand labor only.

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