

Metropolitan Transportation Commission
MTC Planning Committee

December 8, 2023

Agenda Item 7a

Priority Conservation Area Grant Program

Subject:

Approval to release a Call for Projects for the Priority Conservation Area (PCA) Grant Program. The item also summarizes the program's history and outlines proposed priorities for this Call for Projects.

Background:

The PCA Grant Program – funded through the One Bay Area Grant (OBAG) program – was initiated by MTC in collaboration with the State Coastal Conservancy (SCC) in 2013 to provide funding to cities, counties, park districts, utility districts and other agencies and non-profits to acquire, enhance, or improve designated PCAs. Priority Conservation Areas, or PCAs, are regionally significant open spaces with broad agreement for long-term protection. These are often lands being pressured by urban development and other factors, and they are supported through local government consensus and designated by the Association of Bay Area Governments (ABAG).

The PCA Grant Program is one of MTC's primary tools for supporting Plan Bay Area's goal of protecting and enhancing the region's natural and agricultural lands outside urban growth boundaries and identified Growth Geographies, and improving outdoor access and urban greening in existing communities. Strategies in Plan Bay Area 2050 further strengthened the region's commitment to protect high-value conservation lands by advancing a regional goal of protecting and maintaining over 2 million acres of open space by 2050, while accommodating the majority of the region's anticipated housing growth within identified Growth Geographies. Since the PCA Grant Program's inception, MTC and the SCC have jointly disbursed over \$30 million in two rounds to support 58 projects in designated PCAs (Attachment B). Prior PCA Grant Program rounds were divided into two separately managed sub-programs—the North Bay Program, which included the counties of Marin, Napa, Solano, and Sonoma; and the Peninsula, Southern, and Eastern Bay Counties Program, including Alameda, Contra Costa, San Francisco, San Mateo, and Santa Clara Counties. The North Bay Program was managed by the four North

Bay County Transportation Agencies (CTAs) who developed additional program criteria, project solicitations, and project recommendations and solicited approval for those grant recommendations from the Commission.

Priority Conservation Area Grant Program Proposal

MTC Resolution No. 4505 (OBAG 3) commits \$18 million in federal transportation funds to the Priority Conservation Area Grant Program. Projects selected for PCA Grant funding that are ineligible for federal transportation funds will be recommended to receive non-federal exchange funds available to MTC within the OBAG 3 framework. Staff proposes distributing the \$18 million available in two phases.

Phase 1 - February 2024 Call for Projects for \$8.5 million open to all PCAs

Phase 1 would address the outstanding short-term need for project funding. Critical funding would continue prioritizing locally identified conservation investments in areas outside existing population centers and future growth areas, consistent with previous cycles. Due to prior PCA Grant rounds' predominantly federal funding sources, 78 percent of funded projects were trail improvements or access projects, while 12 percent were planning projects, 8 percent were for acquisition or restoration, and 2 percent were urban greening. To better align funding with Plan Bay Area 2050 strategies and the intent of the PCA Program to protect high-value conservation lands and to maximize the benefit of limited non-federal funding, staff would seek to invest a minimum of \$6 million of the available \$8.5 million (70%) in PCAs that would result in the long-term protection, restoration, or enhancement of regionally significant critical habitats, ecosystems, watersheds, farmlands, and/or other agricultural lands. Due to the concentration of regionally significant natural and working lands in the North Bay, including 56 percent of the region's Conservation Lands Network Priority Lands and 81 percent of the region's Prime Farmland, funding would target a minimum of 50 percent of Phase 1 investments be directed to PCAs in Marin, Sonoma, Napa, and Solano counties.

Phase 2 - Spring 2025 Call for Projects in alignment with PCA Refresh for \$8 million

Staff recommends releasing a second Call for Projects in Spring 2025 for \$8 million. Phase 2 is proposed to occur after the "PCA Refresh" process is completed, scheduled for Spring 2024, and after a subsequent ABAG call for new PCA designations. The PCA Refresh is developing meaningful updates to the planning framework and designation process, particularly to advance the use of data and the integration of equity and resilience planning. Phase 2 would fund the implementation of locally identified conservation investments in new and existing PCAs consistent with the "PCA Refresh" planning framework. Pending further discussion with the Committee, funding could also support jurisdictions with updates to General Plan Open Space Elements to apply PCA Refresh priorities into a broader local planning effort or fill critical information gaps to support the PCA Refresh and future PCA grant program.

Priority Conservation Area Grant Program Implementation

Last month, the Commission approved \$1.5 million of the \$18 million available in OBAG 3 for PCA Grant Program implementation. Consistent with OBAG 2 PCA Grant Program implementation, these funds would be programmed to MTC to continue managing, administering, and implementing the PCA Grant Program in close coordination with internal ABAG/MTC departments and external partners.

Next Steps:

Pending Commission approval, staff propose to begin implementation of Phase 1. Staff will conduct broad engagement with local staff from jurisdictions with PCAs in December and January in anticipation of a \$8.5 million February Call for Projects.

Staff will return to the Committee in Summer 2024 with a recommended list of awards. In Fall / Winter 2024, staff will return to the Committee to request authorization to release an \$8 million second Call for Projects.

Issues:

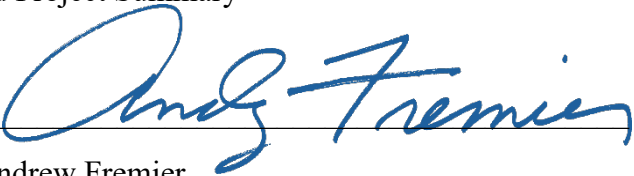
To address a federal corrective action related to MTC's administration of federal grant programs, MTC will select projects for funding for both grant rounds, in consultation with CTAs, the SCC, and other partners. The Calls for Projects will also be available for the full nine county Bay Area.

Recommendations:

Authorize staff to release a Call for Projects for \$8.5 million in OBAG 3 funding for Priority Conservation Area (PCA) Grants.

Attachments:

- Attachment A: PowerPoint
- Attachment B: Prior PCA Grant Funded Project Summary



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