

**CITY OF ALBANY
CITY COUNCIL AGENDA
STAFF REPORT**

Agenda date: May 2, 2022
Reviewed by: NA

SUBJECT: Albany Hill Eucalyptus Project (CIP No. 41015): Project Status Update and Authorization to Submit Application for California Coastal Conservancy Wildfire Resilience Program

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SUMMARY

This report provides an update on the status of the Albany Hill Eucalyptus Project (CIP No. 41015) and requests that City Council adopt a resolution authorizing submittal of a grant application to the California Coastal Conservancy Wildfire Resilience Program in the amount of \$230,000 for the project.

STAFF RECOMMENDATION

That the Council receive a presentation on the status of the Albany Hill Eucalyptus Project and adopt Resolution No. 2022-41:

1. Authorizing staff to submit an application to the Coastal Conservancy for a Wildfire Resilience Grant in the amount of \$230,000 for the Albany Hill Eucalyptus Project (CIP No. 41015) and associated activities, and
2. If awarded, authorizing the City Manager to execute the grant agreement and appropriate the grant funding towards the project, which will be provided to the City on a reimbursement basis for work performed.

BACKGROUND

Albany Hill is a precious natural resource and recreational open space, with a complex pattern of property ownership and ecological importance. In recent years, there has been much focus on the hill as a Monarch Butterfly clustering site. In the Fall of 2020, staff noticed a sudden decline in the health of many of the Eucalyptus trees on the hill, matching the observations of other professionals in other East Bay communities. That following winter and spring, staff partnered with researchers at UC Berkeley and the US Forest Service's Pacific Southwest Research Station who collected samples and performed in-depth scientific analysis.

On June 7, 2021, City Council received a [report](#) on the status of the condition of Blue Gum Eucalyptus on Albany Hill. At that time staff showed Council photos of the declining trees on the hill. Staff reported that they had retained a consulting arborist (SBCA Tree Consulting) to conduct an inspection of trees near roads and trails to evaluate the near-term risk to residences, vehicles, and passers-by. The arborist submitted a report to staff on July 23, 2021.

Staff also briefed Council about the study sampling declining eucalyptus for pathogens by researchers from UC Berkeley. The sampling study was reported to the Parks Recreation and Open Space Commission at their [May 2021 meeting](#). Results of the pathogen study became available on September 21, 2021.

On October 18, 2021 staff [updated](#) the Council on the findings of the following reports: Albany Hill Eucalyptus Tree Survey from SBCA Tree Consulting, Eucalyptus Dieback Report from UC Berkeley, and Water Stress Readings Report from Cal Fire. Staff also provided an update on studies on fuel loads and monarch habitat. At that meeting Council adopted [Resolution No. 2021-105](#), authorizing establishment of the Albany Hill Eucalyptus Project (CIP No. 41015) and appropriating \$100,000 from remaining Measure R capital funds for the project.

The City has several studies in process to further assess monarch habitat, overall fire fuel load risk and eucalyptus decline on Albany Hill. The results of these studies will be incorporated into the eucalyptus removal project as well as inform the City's ongoing vegetation management activities. The following is a brief summary and status of each study.

Enhanced Monarch Habitat Assessment: This work is being completed by Stuart Wiess from Creekside Science. The scope includes lidar scanning of the public and private open spaces to provide a more detailed mapping of habitat area. The field work is substantially complete, and data is being analyzed. The expected completion is early summer.

Fire Fuel Load Assessment: This work is being completed by Carol Rice and Cheryl Miller. The scope includes a comprehensive analysis of fuel loads across both public and private open spaces. The analysis will result in mitigation measure to reduce fuel loads and fire risks across Albany Hill. This work is being done in collaboration with the Enhanced Monarch Habitat Assessment so that the recommendations are compatible with the Monarch habitat. The field work is complete, and results are expected in early summer.

Higher Level Eucalyptus Assessment: This work was performed by McNeil Arboriculture Consultants. Using enhanced assessment techniques, this study evaluated approximately 40 trees in or near Monarch clustering locations to determine the current mechanical condition and associated failure potential, whether failure potential is increased by removal of nearby trees which might expose the tree to unaccustomed, and whether the health of the tree suggests that it might die within a short timeframe. The work is complete.

Staff will also present information from the Monarch and fuel load studies and findings from the tree assessment as well as an overall update on the activities on Albany Hill at the May Parks Recreation and Open Space Commission meeting.

The California Coastal Conservancy released a Request for Proposals for their Wildfire Resilience Program on December 3, 2021. The program has funding for on-the-ground projects (\$10 million) and capacity-building projects (\$7 million) for restoring the health and increasing resiliency of California forests, grasslands, and natural lands from Marin County south to Ventura County. Some projects may be eligible for CEQA funding.

Staff submitted a pre-application on January 14, 2022 and on March 17 the Coastal Conservancy asked the City to submit a full application, which is due May 16.

DISCUSSION

The project proposed for this grant meets the purpose of the Coastal Conservancy's Wildfire Resilience Program, which is to provide grants in California's coastal counties to restore the health and resilience of California forests, grasslands, and natural lands in a manner that reduces fire risk to communities.

The proposed project also meets the following priorities of the grant program:

- Project addresses high wildfire risk area, such as those identified in the CalFire Fire Hazard Severity Zones or the FRAP Priority Landscape Maps: Priority Landscapes
- Project implements the California Wildfire and Forest Resilience Action Plan
- Project provides significant public benefit
- Project benefits disadvantaged or underserved community
- Projects leads to longer term resilience or more sustainable benefits
- Project address demonstrated need or regional problem
- Project will support demonstrable increase to wildfire resilience implementation
- Project will leverage resources through coordination across jurisdictions
- Project has long term funding plan, applicant commitment

The proposed grant application includes the following three elements:

- **Project Planning & Design:** The requested funds from the Coastal Conservancy will be combined with funds previously appropriated by the Council (Resolution No. 2021-105) to develop a plan for phased removal of dead and declining eucalyptus trees as outlined in CIP Project No. 41015 – Albany Hill Eucalyptus Project. This plan will include but is not limited to: plantings of other tall trees in areas of the hill where monarchs have traditionally clustered; survey of the existing native understory which will be allowed to grow after eucalyptus removal; and analysis and design of additional plantings of Albany Hill-sourced native plants. This project element includes CEQA analysis and compliance as necessary.
- **Fire Safety:** The requested grant funds will be used to extend Urban Tilth's contract by one (1) year to ensure that Albany Hill continues to be fire-safe while the removal and restoration plan is in development. Urban Tilth's Watershed Stewardship Restoration Field Crew works year-round on the hill to reduce fire hazards by mowing grasslands, pruning vegetation along fire roads, removing dead and downed material, and planting natives, which have lower fire hazards.

- **Education & Research:** The requested allocation will make possible the establishment of a Habitat Restoration Intern Program and an Indigenous Partnership Program to increase our understanding of plant and animal communities on the hill, which will help in our development of more fire resilient, healthy ecosystems.

Table: Grant Funds Proposed Allocation

Project Element	Proposed Grant Amount
Project Planning & Design	\$140,000
Fire Safety	\$60,000
Education & Research	\$30,000
Total	\$230,000

At the request of the Coastal Conservancy, staff has also included details of the proposed future phases of the project, including implementation and construction of the final plan for tree removal and habitat restoration. This phase however is contingent upon completion of the Planning item above, and costs for this phase are not included in the current grant funding request.

CITY COUNCIL STRATEGIC PLAN INITIATIVES

Authorizing application to the grant program continues to further the City Council's 2021-2022 Strategic Plan as follows:

Goal 3 Maximize and Improve Parks and Open Space

- Objective 2 Enhance Open Space,
 - Item 1: Develop a prioritized list of projects on Albany Hill and include in the CIP program, and
 - Item 2: Develop a forest management plan for Albany Hill including fuel load analysis.

SUSTAINABILITY CONSIDERATIONS

The project is consistent with the goals, policies, and actions of the following plans:

City of Albany Climate Action and Adaptation Plan 2019, Goal 3: Increase resilience of natural lands and systems. Approach: Manage, restore, and partner to foster resilient natural landscapes. events Action 4.3.2 Continue to manage wildfire risk by implementing vegetation management and fuel reduction programs.

Albany 2035 General Plan, Parks, Recreation, and Open Space Element:

Action PROS-1.B: Creekside Master Plan Implementation: Implement the open space management recommendations of the 2012 Creekside Master Plan, including vegetation management, trail improvements, signage and other park improvements

Policy PROS-3.7: Vegetation Management: Ensure that park landscaping and maintenance practices are consistent with City policies to reduce wildfire hazards and manage vegetation. These practices should also reinforce City programs to conserve water, promote Bay-friendly landscaping such as native, non-invasive, drought- tolerant plants, and use reclaimed water for irrigation

Albany 2035 General Plan, Conservation and Sustainability Element:

Policy CON-1.3: Conservation of Albany Hill: Protect and restore natural features, native vegetation, and wildlife on Albany Hill.

Policy CON-2.5: Albany Hill Vegetation Management: Protect the remaining native plant communities on Albany Hill. Vegetation on the Hill should be managed in a way that gradually reduces the extent of the eucalyptus forest and encourages native plants to return.

Action CON-2.D: Creekside Master Plan Implementation: Implement the vegetation management prescriptions of the Albany Hill Creekside Master Plan, and periodically update the Plan as conditions change.

Action CON-2.G: Native Plant Restoration: Preserve and enhance native plant communities in the city while encouraging the control or removal of invasive and non-native species.

Policy CON-5.3: Monarch Butterfly Roosting: Consider potential impacts to Monarch butterfly roosting sites on Albany Hill in any future applications for development, park expansion, trail construction, and fuel reduction on the Hill.

Action CON-5.D: Monarch Butterfly Surveys: For construction projects that would affect eucalyptus, pine, and cypress groves during the period between September and March, require pre-construction surveys by a qualified biologist to determine if roosting Monarch butterflies are present. In the event winter colonies are identified, require appropriate measures to avoid impacts, such as postponing tree removal until butterflies have left or by designating buffer areas around the affected trees.

SOCIAL EQUITY & INCLUSIVITY CONSIDERATIONS

Ongoing vegetation management work by the Watershed Stewardship Restoration Field Crew of Urban Tilth is critical to keeping Albany Hill safe from fire hazards as well as helping to restore ecosystems on the hill. Their Watershed Stewardship Program employs and empowers young

adults who live in Richmond and surrounding communities. This grant would extend Urban Tilth's contract on Albany Hill for one year.

Another component of the project is partnering with Indigenous People, who have historically been excluded from decisions about uses on their traditional homelands. Staff is engaged with the Lisjan Ohlone about collaborating on activities on Albany Hill.

FINANCIAL CONSIDERATIONS

The requested grant amount is \$230,000.

Local matching funds are not required for the grant, but the requested grant funding will augment City appropriated funds to support the project (\$100,000, Resolution No. 2021-105) as well as funds devoted to support of ongoing fire safety and vegetation management as incorporated into the Public Works operating budget.

If awarded, the grant funds will be administered on a reimbursement basis for project expenditures incurred.

ATTACHMENTS

1. Resolution No. 2022-41
2. Coastal Conservancy Wildfire Resilience Program Request for Proposals
3. Coastal Conservancy Wildfire Resilience Grant Final Application