



MOUNTAINS RECREATION & CONSERVATION AUTHORITY

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MEMORANDUM

TO: The Governing Board

FROM: 
Joseph T. Edmiston, FAICP, Hon. ASLA, Executive Officer

DATE: November 1, 2017

SUBJECT: **Agenda Item VI(b): Consideration of resolution authorizing (a) the acceptance of funds from the National Wildlife Federation for the Liberty Canyon Wildlife Crossing; (b) entering into agreements with, and accepting funds from, other public agencies and non-profit organizations; (c) entering into agreements with the California Department of Transportation and other entities for dispersal of funds to the project.**

Staff Recommendation: That the Governing Board adopt the attached resolution authorizing (a) the acceptance of funds from the National Wildlife Federation for the Liberty Canyon Wildlife Crossing in the amount of \$126,000; (b) entering into agreements with, and accepting funds from, other public agencies and non-profit organizations; (c) entering into agreements with the California Department of Transportation and other entities for dispersal of funds to the project.

Background: A wildlife crossing of U.S. 101 near Liberty Canyon Road in the City of Agoura Hills in Los Angeles County is currently in the planning stages, with the California Department of Transportation (Caltrans) serving as the lead agency. The crossing will restore safe wildlife travel along a corridor between the inland Sierra Madre Mountains and the coastal Santa Monica Mountains.

The project's primary beneficiary will be the Santa Monica Mountains mountain lion population, which is experiencing increased mortality, inbreeding, and declining health as a result of being "trapped" by the Highway 101 freeway. The need for such a crossing is supported by many years of mountain lion studies conducted by National Park Services and others. The crossing was conceptualized many years ago and has broad support from a variety of conservation agencies, environmental activists, and other stakeholders. The crossing potentially would be the largest wildlife crossing in the world, spanning 10 lanes of freeway and 140 feet of asphalt.

Caltrans is currently in an environmental planning phase for the project, which entails the preparation of environmental documents (both California Environmental

Quality Act (CEQA) and National Environmental Planning Act (NEPA)) and associated public outreach, and preparation of initial engineering design plans for the crossing. Upon completion of these plans and documents, Caltrans will adopt the environmental document, select a preferred alternative (overpass, underpass, or no project), and proceed to final engineering design for the selected alternative.

Earlier this summer, MRCA was contacted regarding residual funds in a SAFETEA-LU grant for a completed National Park Service acquisition project. The grant had a remaining balance of approximately \$224,000, and due to a recording error MRCA was listed as the project proponent. MRCA staff worked with NPS, Caltrans, and Metro (the Los Angeles County Metropolitan Transportation Authority) staff to re-purpose the residual funds to support the Liberty Canyon Wildlife Crossing project. MRCA has provided a letter of support from NPS and the existing Cooperative Agreement for the Santa Monica Mountains National Recreation Area to Caltrans as evidence that NPS supports this action. However it is possible that Caltrans, Metro or the Federal Highway Administration may require different documents in the future to accept and/or disperse the funds, and these agencies are likely to do so with short notice. Due to the critical nature of the project, and the relative inflexibility of the other agencies involved, staff is taking the unusual step of requesting a general authorization to enter into agreements for the project. The Governing Board will be updated when and if such agreements occur.

Subsequent to the SAFETEA-LU funds request, Caltrans staff next inquired with MRCA staff about being the conduit for funding donated to the project. Specifically, the National Wildlife Federation (NWF) has collected \$126,000 in donations for the project, however Caltrans was not able to accept funding from a non-profit. NWF raised these funds through their donor community through the #SaveLACougars campaign, and may collect more in the future. As with the SAFETEA-LU funds, it is possible that Caltrans may require additional agreements in the future to use funds on the project. Therefore, the proposed action would authorize acceptance of other funds from NWF, or other organizations, as well as authorize agreements with Caltrans to disburse funds for the project. The Governing Board will be updated when and if such funding is secured.

Consideration: The proposed action would accept, and subsequently disburse, funding to support the Liberty Canyon Wildlife Crossing. At this time \$350,000 of funding has been identified, but there is a possibility of increasing this amount in the future.

Fiscal Impact: The subject funding was not included in the fiscal year 17/18 budget and will need to be added as both revenue and expenditure. The proposed action will not result in any new maintenance obligations. Funding for staff time to coordinate these items will be paid by the agency's general fund.