

San Francisco Bay Area Water Trail Project
Summary from Ann Buell, Project Manager, State Coastal Conservancy
October, 2008

Description of the Water Trail. The San Francisco Bay Area Water Trail (Water Trail, or WT) project strives to create a network of launch and landing sites, or “trailheads,” to allow people in human-powered boats and beachable sail craft (small, non-motorized boats) enjoy the historic, scenic, and environmental richness of San Francisco Bay through single and multiple-day trips on the Bay. Trailhead owners and managers would join the Water Trail network on a voluntary basis, as the Water Trail project has no regulatory powers. It has been designed to promote safe and responsible recreational use of the Bay, while protecting and increasing appreciation of its environmental resources through education and coordinated, strategic access. Currently there is no regional project or program dedicated to the safe and responsible use of the Bay by those who access its waters from the existing launch and landing sites.

The Water Trail Act. The California legislature established the San Francisco Bay Area Water Trail by enacting the Water Trail Act, (“the WT Act”) (AB 1296, see Appendix D) in 2005. In approving the WT Act, the legislature found that water-oriented recreational uses of San Francisco Bay are “of great benefit to the public welfare of the San Francisco Bay Area” and that “with loss of public open space, the public increasingly looks to the Bay, the region’s largest open space, for recreational opportunities.” This legislation culminated years of advocacy work by Bay Access, Incorporated, a non-profit organization dedicated to the creation of the Water Trail as well as by other non-motorized boating advocates.

The WT Act points to the proven benefits of other water trails in the United States, citing their effective promotion of water-oriented recreation for citizens of all economic means, their influence on the renewal of industrial waterfronts, and their positive regional economic benefit. It finds that “water trails can inform the public about natural, cultural, and historic features and foster public stewardship of these resources.” It also finds that San Francisco Bay is an aquatic habitat of international importance, emphasizing that it “provides critical habitat for 70 percent of the shore birds and 50 percent of the diving ducks on the Pacific Flyway...” as well as “for marine mammals, other aquatic species, and colonial nesting birds...” including many federally and state-listed species, such as the California clapper rail.

The Water Trail is intended to link existing and future access points around the Bay, advancing the regional goals and state mandate of BCDC to foster public access and recreational use of the Bay. It is also meant to be implemented consistent with the goals of improving access consistent with the rights of private property owners, and without having a significant adverse impact on agricultural operations and environmentally sensitive areas and wildlife, including wetlands and other wildlife habitats, and considering navigational safety and homeland security concerns. Other specific objectives include the provision of diverse water-accessible overnight accommodations, including camping.

The Water Trail Plan. The WT Plan (September 2007), currently in final draft form, is a guide to trail implementation for the agencies and organizations that will develop and manage WT access points and programs, as well as trail proponents and other stakeholders involved in trail implementation. The development of the WT Plan was led by BCDC and benefited from the active participation of a broad-based steering committee, stakeholders, and experts on specific topics. All background reports, meeting notes, and the final draft Plan itself are posted on BCDC's website at www.bcdc.ca.gov. The WT Plan includes policies and procedures that define how the trail will take shape over time by guiding trail planning, development, and management on organizational, programmatic, and trailhead-specific levels. The WT Plan and its maps may also be reviewed in their entirety at www.scc.ca.gov. The Plan will be finalized when it is accepted by the Coastal Conservancy board along with the final form of this Draft EIR.

Basic Access Needs. Basic access onto the water consists of a place to launch, whether it is a beach, a dock, ramp, tidal steps, piers, a floating dock, or other means. Parking is usually another essential component of access for human-powered boating and boardsailing recreationists. Where feasible, accommodations should be made for those with mobility impairments or other limitations (Americans with Disabilities Act).

Access can be enhanced with a variety of improvements and services, such as restrooms, boat drop-off parking zones, equipment storage, boat houses, transient docking, overnight accommodations (such as a hostel, campsite, historic ship, hotel, or bed and breakfast), rigging areas, fresh water for washing gear, individual or group picnic areas, a restaurant or café, rental concessions, trash and recycling containers, bicycle racks, lighting, emergency phones, landscaping, trail system connections, and trailhead wayfinding signs from the local street network, and safety information and regulatory signs.

Project Implementation. The State Coastal Conservancy (SCC) is leading the implementation and search for funding for the Water Trail. As such, SCC is leading an environmental review of the project, consistent with the California Environmental Quality Act (CEQA), and will circulate a revised Draft Environmental Impact Report (DEIR) to the public in early 2009. After the EIR is finalized, a Project Management Team and Advisory Committee will begin the process of actually designating sites to become official trailheads of the Water Trail.

Funding. The Water Trail Act did not legislate funding for the Water Trail, so SCC, the Department of Boating and Waterways, and other public agencies investing in the Water Trail need to find funding on their own. SCC currently has funds from Propositions 50 and 84 that could be applied toward Water Trail projects if they consist of capital improvements.

San Leandro Marina. The San Leandro Marina is one of 57 "High Opportunity Sites" listed in the Water Trail Plan, meaning that it appears to need nothing more than an educational sign to be added to the site to establish it as one of the Water Trail sites. The Final EIR should cover all environmental review needed, but the Project Management Team will take one last look at the site during the Trailhead Designation process to be sure.