

R-23-72 Meeting 23-17 June 28, 2023

**AGENDA ITEM 4** 

#### AGENDA ITEM

Award of Contract with Grassroots Ecology to Conduct Service-Learning Natural Resource Stewardship Activities that Engage the Public

### GENERAL MANAGER'S RECOMMENDATION

Authorize the General Manager to enter into a four-year agreement with Grassroots Ecology of Palo Alto, California to provide service-learning events for an amount not to exceed \$408,000, a portion of which (up to \$250,000) is reimbursable through an existing grant.

#### **SUMMARY**

Since 2015, the Midpeninsula Regional Open Space District (District) and Grassroots Ecology (Grassroots) have partnered to provide stewardship and volunteer engagement to expand public awareness, involvement, and support of natural resource management activities. In 2019, the Board of Directors (Board) authorized Grassroots Ecology to conduct service-learning events at four sites within the District through 2023 (R-19-145). The General Manager recommends awarding a new four-year cooperative agreement with Grassroots in the amount of \$408,000 to continue holding educational resource management activities with the public. The Fiscal Year (FY24) 2023-24 budget includes sufficient funds to cover expenditures through June 30, 2024. Funds to complete the contract work in future years would be proposed as part of the annual Budget and Action Plan process. A portion of the contract, up to \$250,000 over the four years, is reimbursable through a Memorandum of Understanding and an associated grant from Valley Water.

#### **DISCUSSION**

#### Service-Learning

Service-learning on District-managed lands is an educational approach that combines learning objectives, through formal and informal interpretative talks by knowledgeable leaders, with community service. Service-learning projects meet resource management goals while achieving the District's mission to "provide opportunities for ecologically sensitive public enjoyment and education." It provides a "down-to-earth" enriched learning experience while engaging community members in meaningful stewardship work to protect and restore the natural environment.

#### Grassroots Ecology

Grassroots (<u>www.grassrootsecology.org</u>) is a local, nonprofit 501(c)(3) whose mission "is to engage and educate the public to restore local ecosystems" (Attachment 1). In 2015, the Board authorized a partnership agreement with Grassroots to broaden volunteer stewardship

R-23-72 Page 2

opportunities at District open space preserves (R-15-145). In 2019, The Board entered into a contract with Grassroots to conduct service-learning events and restoration work through 2023. Grassroots staff have extensive experience in managing habitat restoration volunteer programs and establishing relationships with local schools for the purposes of outreach, education, and volunteer recruitment. Over 80% of the participants are local youth. Grassroots Ecology works to involve underserved communities wherever possible, such as working with the San Jose Conservation Corps, thereby expanding diversity efforts consistent with the District's Equality, Diversity, and Inclusion Policy.

#### Partnership Highlights to Date:

- Engaged 1,750 individuals through 130+ service-learning events over eight years.
- Created volunteer opportunities that affirm belonging in the outdoors for youth and individuals whose backgrounds are underrepresented in the environmental field. For example, in 2023, Grassroots Ecology hosted two LGBTQ+ volunteer events on District lands to meet the growing need for queer outdoor spaces.
- Provided high-quality environmental education programming for students during service-focused field trips. More than 35 school groups ranging from 4th grade through college have volunteered with Grassroots Ecology on District lands.
- Partnered with the District's Volunteer Program to host volunteer events for the District's 50<sup>th</sup> Anniversary.
- At the Hawthorns area of Windy Hill Open Space Preserve, the non-native yellow starthistle population has been reduced by 99% through cooperative management by Grassroots Ecology and the District. Grassroots Ecology provided the District with mowing recommendations for four years, then recruited volunteers to hand pull yellow starthistle resprouts annually.
- At Russian Ridge Open Space Preserve, yellow starthistle is removed annually from the parking lot at Skyline Blvd and Page Mill Rd.
- At Bear Creek Redwoods Open Space Preserve, dense patches of French broom that were encroaching on sensitive habitat have been removed. In 2023, 15,000+ grass plugs were planted at a degraded wetland.

The new proposed agreement would allow Grassroots to continue existing resource management efforts through service-learning events at both the Hawthorns area of Windy Hill, Russian Ridge, Rancho San Antonio, and Bear Creek Redwoods OSPs, and expand similar efforts at other District preserves in Santa Clara County using grant funding from Valley Water. Service-learning events with Grassroots involve teaching volunteers how to identify and manually remove targeted invasive species while educating them on the impacts of these species on the natural resources.

#### Grant Funding

Valley Water provides funding for habitat restoration activities through its Measure B, the Safe, Clean Water and Natural Flood Protection Program. In June of 2017, the Board authorized the General Manager to enter into a five-year MOU (ending in July of 2022) with Valley Water under the D2: Revitalize Stream, Upland and Wetland Habitat Program (R-17-79). In February 2023, the MOU was amended to extend it through June 30, 2028. This program is one of five priority programs in Santa Clara County. Funding under this program is available for the removal of non-native, invasive plants, revegetation of habitats with native species, and public education about the impacts of invasive species and benefits of native species.

R-23-72 Page 3

The District may be reimbursed up to \$275,000 per year for work meeting grant criteria, as outlined in the MOU. The work in Santa Clara County under the proposed contract with Grassroots meets the MOU grant criteria for reimbursement. Depending on the location and number of service-learning events authorized, this contract is anticipated to be reimbursed an average of \$25,000 to \$62,500 per year with the balance of the grant work being performed by other field crews.

#### FISCAL IMPACT

There are sufficient funds in the FY24 budget to cover the cost of the recommendation through June 30, 2024. The Valley Water grant would cover contract costs for work completed within Santa Clara County. The remaining costs for work completed within San Mateo County would be covered by Fund 10 General Fund Operating. The table below summarizes the funding sources and expenditures over the four years, as described in the recommendation.

Cooperative agreement with	FY24	FY25	FY26	FY27	TOTAL
<b>Grassroots Ecology</b>	Projected	Projected	Projected	Projected	IOIAL
District Funded (Fund 10):	\$39,500	\$39,500	\$39,500	\$39,500	\$158,000
Valley Water Grant Amount*:	\$62,500	\$62,500	\$62,500	\$62,500	\$250,000
<b>Total Funding Sources:</b>	\$102,000	\$102,000	\$102,000	\$102,000	\$408,000

<sup>\*</sup>Maximum grant reimbursement funding estimated at time of this report.

The recommended action is not funded by Measure AA.

#### PRIOR BOARD AND COMMITTEE REVIEW

In 2019, the Board authorized Grassroots Ecology to conduct service-learning events at four sites within the District through 2023 (R-19-145, Minutes).

The Board approved a grant funding MOU between the District and Valley Water on June 28, 2017 (R-17-79, Minutes), which was subsequently signed on July 24, 2017.

In 2015, the Board authorized a partnership agreement with Grassroots to broaden volunteer stewardship opportunities at District OSPs (R-15-145, Minutes).

#### **PUBLIC NOTICE**

Public notice was provided as required by the Brown Act. Public notice was sent to interested parties and adjoining neighbors by postal or electronic mail.

#### **CEQA COMPLIANCE**

The Environmental Impact Report (EIR) prepared for the District's IPM Program, which the Board approved on December 10, 2014 (R-14-148, Minutes), analyzed the vegetation management activities in the recommended contract. On February 27, 2019, the Board approved an addendum to the Final EIR for the IPM Program (R-19-11, Minutes). District staff have incorporated the associated mitigation measures and BMPs from the environmental review documents into the proposed project and the contract documents.

R-23-72 Page 4

#### **NEXT STEPS**

Upon approval by the Board, the General Manager will enter into a four-year contract with Grassroots to oversee service-learning events focused on protecting and restoring the natural environment. A portion of the contract will be reimbursed using Valley Water grant funding. All work associated with this contract will be reported to the Board as part of the annual IPM Report.

#### Attachments

- 1. Grassroots Ecology Annual Report
- 2. Current Project Locations

Responsible Department Head: Kirk Lenington, Natural Resources

Prepared by:

Coty Sifuentes-Winter, Senior Resource Management Specialist, Natural Resources





In the fight for climate resilience and healthy ecosystems, we need all hands on deck. That's why we are working hard at Grassroots Ecology to ensure that everyone has access to outdoor experiences and the opportunity to steward our local ecosystems.



What does this mean? It is factoring equity and inclusivity into everything we do. It is recruiting new board and staff members who are passionate about our mission and connecting with the diversity of our local community. It is offering more events and resources in Spanish, using gender-inclusive language at our programs, and updating our website with more information on accessibility. It is our staff continuing the conversation about income inequality and racial justice in our region, and how this affects our work.

Recognizing that not everyone can afford to volunteer for an unpaid internship, our biggest initiative this year was to create a 10-month, paid internship program for college students and early career environmental professionals. We are so energized by the 10 interns that worked alongside our staff this year and are excited to see where their careers will take them in the future. Meet several of them on pages 6 and 7.

By continuing to build a foundation for inclusivity and equity, we can foster diversity in the environmental community much like we foster biodiversity in our ecosystems. We have more to do, and it will take all of us working together to ensure a resilient future for our planet. Join us!

Alex Von Feldt **EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR** 

Junko Bryant ASSISTANT DIRECTOR

COOLEY LANDING

## Where We Work

Since 2015, we have engaged local youth and volunteers to restore habitat along the East Palo Alto shoreline where

**BOL PARK** 

a landfill once stood. ▶

Together with neighbors and volunteers, we have transformed Bol Park into a haven of urban habitat for birds and pollinators! Our latest addition of a rain garden in 2018 has reduced flooding along the bike path while boosting biodiversity.

HENDRYS CREEK

After spreading native seed over ripped roads and building pads and planting thousands of native plants, acorns, and buckeye nuts, our Hendrys Creek restoration project is complete.



680 San Francisco Bay

San Jose

680

Alviso 😱

580

Redwood City East Palo Alto Menlo Park 😵 Palo Alto

580

880

San Mateo County Santa Clara County 680 Los Altos **Portola Valley** Los Altos Hills

> Cupertino

> > Saratoga

**Los Gatos** 

**HABITAT RESTORATION SITES** 

DEMONSTRATION **GARDENS** 

280



**WATER QUALITY MONITORING SITES** 

Grassroots Ecology acknowledges that we work on the traditional, ancestral, unceded lands of the Association of Ramaytush Ohlone, Tamien Nation, Amah Mutsun Tribal Band, and Muwekma Ohlone. We continue to build our capacity to develop meaningful partnerships that support the sovereignty of these Indigenous communities.

# Volunteers are Back in Action!

Watch out weeds, our volunteers are coming for you! After an 18-month freeze, our community workdays reopened to the public in September 2021. Over the remainder of the year, more than 4,100 volunteers turned out to plant and protect native species, battle invasive weeds, and clean up our creeks and shoreline.

While we always enjoy getting to know our volunteers as we work side by side in the field, last year we decided to get to know you all in a more systematic way. Our new volunteer survey has helped us better understand who our volunteers are, what drives you to participate, and how we can help you get the most out of your experience. Here are some highlights of what we learned:

said they understood how their actions had a positive impact on the ecosystem.

of respondents were repeat volunteers, and the remaining 62% were first-time volunteers. We hope you keep coming back!

said they learned about our workdays by word of mouth. Thanks for helping us get the word out!

TOP 3
REASONS
PEOPLE
VOLUNTEER
WITH US:

BUILDING COMMUNITY,
MEETING NEW PEOPLE

2

TO HELP THE ENVIRONMENT

3

INTEREST IN OUTDOOR WORK/CAREER



77

I really enjoyed the event! Made me feel muscles I haven't felt in a while! Loved getting into the dirt and learning."

The activities were fun and rewarding. I can't wait to come back in the spring and check on the plants I planted as well as the established plants that I weeded around."



This was very educational and fun. Our Grassroots Ecology guides were very friendly and supportive and a wealth of interesting information."



# ASSROOTS ECOLOGY 2021–22 Annual

# Opening Doors to Outdoor Careers

Aspiring environmental professionals who cannot afford to sacrifice pay for a volunteer internship now have the chance to learn and grow with us while earning income and gaining job experience.

Launched in September 2021, our 10-month paid internship program provides ecological education, fieldwork, mentorship, and training in one of two concentration areas: habitat restoration and native plant conservation.

Not only do our interns discover the wonders of nature in open spaces near them, they discover new possibilities for who they can be and the world they wish to create.











I decided park
management was
where I wanted to go
with my career. The
Grassroots Ecology
internship has been a
great way to learn
more about the ecology
in our local parks
while also networking
and further developing
my skills outside."

**Alfredo Gonzalez Velez** 



In a short time,
Grassroots Ecology has
influenced my life,
especially with
understanding more
about what I am
actually passionate
about. When it comes
to environmentalism,
I feel that my role has
become critical in
showing my
community the
importance of having
a relationship with
nature."

**Aisha Williams** 



This internship hit every goal of mine. I'm incredibly passionate about getting out and getting the work done to improve our local habitats as well as interacting with the community to better understand their relationship to environmental issues."

**Christian Tensuan** 

77

Beyond the array of new skills and knowledge I have picked up from this internship, I have also gained a newfound sense of self-belief in my abilities to impact the world around me and to accomplish my goals."

Dvlan Randazzo

# Youth Finding Their Power and Place in Nature

During their time outside with us, each student in our Youth Stewards Program discovers new things about the natural world, and about themselves.

This year over 160 committed and curious Youth Stewards joined us for outdoor learning at one of 7 park sites, ranging from preserves in the foothills of Cupertino, Palo Alto, and Redwood City to the baylands of East Palo Alto.

Youth Stewards learned all about the ecology of their site—from its plants and animal species to its soil, watershed, geology, history, and restoration needs. Even more exciting, they applied their knowledge to improve park habitat from the ground up.



I felt great accomplishment after completing the various restoration tasks such as weeding, willow staking, and my personal favorite, planting."

Rohan Redwood Grove Youth Steward

The Youth Stewards Program gave me a greater appreciation of restoration practices and strengthened my resolve to learn more, volunteer more, and do something about the environmental crisis."

**Emma** 

McClellan Ranch

Byrne Preserve Youth Steward

I loved these past 10 weeks because the bonding every Friday, I could be in nature after a Tomas long week and Cooley Landing Youth Steward just enjoy the fresh air, people,

and snacks. Annabelle

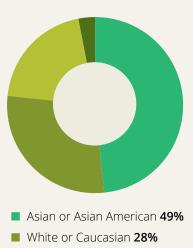
I will remember experience with my friends."

Even weeding was fun."

Praagya

Byrne Preserve Youth Steward

#### YOUTH DEMOGRAPHICS



Hispanic or Latino 20%

■ Native American 3%

72% People of color

58% Identified as children of immigrants

16% Identified as immigrants

11% Low-income

As part of our commitment to equity, we prioritize outreach and enrollment of youth from low-income and immigrant communities; and work closely with schools in these communities to tailor our programs to their students.



# RASSROOTS ECOLOGY 2021–22 Annual Repo

## The Path of a Steward

Grassroots Ecology aspires to help each person we work with move forward along their own personal stewardship path. Natalie Kataoka is one such individual who we have had the privilege to walk with in the early stages of her stewardship journey. See how far she has come in the past five years since we first met her!

#### 2017

Natalie joins our Youth Stewards Program at Redwood Grove and discovers a love of volunteering. By the end of the summer, she contributes over 100 hours of service doing everything from yanking weeds to counting bugs.

"Meeting people who shared my ideals of sustainability encouraged me that we as a team were making a difference on that particular day, regardless if the workday attracted 5 people or 25 people."



Natalie's calling to stewardship takes root.

#### 2019

Natalie's first year of college at the University of Oregon. Without hesitation she declares Environmental Science as her major.



#### 2020

Natalie's plans to study abroad in Ecuador are canceled due to COVID. Instead of doing rainforest research, she focuses on local issues—coauthoring a book on how cities can adapt their streets to be more accessible during COVID, and working part-time for the Sustainable Cities Institute.

#### 2021

Natalie's environmental knowledge and research

skills expand and deepen during college.

As part of her college's Environmental Leadership Program, Natalie contributes to a forest health management assessment for the City of Eugene to investigate the impact of climate change on local forests. She begins her senior thesis on nitrogen fixing symbionts in grasslands, and volunteers at a local park to clear invasive ivy—bringing back fond memories of Grassroots Ecology

#### 2022

Natalie graduates with a B.S. in Environmental Science, and minors in Biology and Public Policy. She is accepted into a U.C. Davis' Master's program in Environmental Policy and Management, which starts in the fall.

While Natalie's stewardship journey has now advanced far beyond Grassroots Ecology, memories of her time with us continue to keep her grounded:

"I think about this moment a lot even now... I was under some coyote brush, pruning it with other volunteers. I remember the moss beneath me, looking up through the branches at the blue sky and bright clouds. I could hear birds singing. It was so peaceful. I want to be in a future with more moments like that. Remembering it helps me stay connected to why I started this work in the first place. I found my unexpected happy place."



By the time Natalie graduates from college, her capacity for stewardship is in full bloom.

#### 2018

Guided by our staff, Natalie leads her own research project at Redwood Grove exploring the use of cornmeal to suppress invasive plants. She celebrates her 18th birthday volunteering with her friends at Redwood Grove.

"I found where I belonged and what I want to dedicate my future towards...being an environmentalist, a volunteer, and a steward."



Natalie with her fellow Youth Stewards in 2017. A love of stewardship sprouts.



What I have gained

from working in the

# All That Grows at Our Nursery

Last year our Native Plant Nursery grew over 25,000 plants for reintroduction onto public lands, including 200+ endemic species. Each of these plants began as a seed or cutting hand-collected by our staff, and each has an important ecological role to play.

But our nursery grew more than plants; we grew environmental stewards—people who value the natural world and take action to protect it. The nursery provided fertile ground for learning about native plant conservation to our interns and Watershed Stewards Program Corpmembers.





A Roxy Layden, Nursery Intern (middle), developing her plant identification skills with fellow Nursery Intern Dylan Randazzo (left) and Nursery Director Deanna Guiliano (right).

SSROOTS ECOLOGY 2021-22 Annual Rep

# Addressing Urgent Environ mental Needs of Our Time



#### FIRI

We are supporting cities to implement sustainable fire clearing practices that reduce fire risk while protecting native species.



#### NATER

The rain gardens, catchment systems, and lawn replacements we create with volunteers conserve precious water and show our community how to create water conserving landscapes.



#### **BIODIVERSITY**

Thousands of beneficial native plants that our local animal species depend on for survival are putting roots down thanks to the efforts of our Native Plant Nursery and Habitat Restoration team.





San Jose Conservation Corps members work with our staff at Pearsons Arastradero Preserve to remove medusahead grass, an invasive annual that creates flammable thatch build-up in dry summer and fall months.

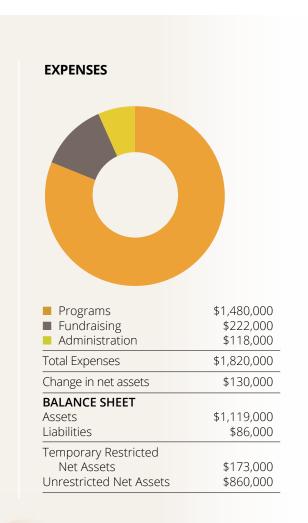
# Financials

Revenue and Expenses, July 1, 2021 - June 30, 2022 Preliminary and unaudited

\$1,950,000

# REVENUE SOURCES City Contracts \$543,000 Individual Donations \$411,000 Government Agencies \$409,000 PPP Grant \$229,000 Foundation Grants \$170,000 Nursery Sales and Services \$95,000 Corporate Contributions \$91,000 Program Fees, Other \$2,000

Total Revenue





Kate and Matt Dolkas

# Supporters

July 1, 2021 - June 30, 2022

\* Long-term loyalty donors and funders of 5 years or more

Our mission is only attainable through the participation and support of many different people and partners. Your collective generosity powers our ongoing restoration and education programs across two counties, while also allowing us to adapt and create new programs that meet the evolving needs of local lands and communities. Thank you!

#### \$100,000+

City of Palo Alto\* Midpeninsula Regional Open Space District\* Valley Water\*

#### \$50,000-\$99,999

Bohannon Foundation
City of Cupertino\*
City of Los Altos\*
Barb Lachenbruch in honor of
her parents, Art and Edie
Lachenbruch
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#### \$25,000-\$49,999

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#### \$10,000-\$24,999

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#### \$100-\$249

Pooja Agarwal Ann Akey Laurie Alexander Amazon Smile Stanislaw Antol



# GRASSROOTS ECOLOGY 2021–22 Annual Report

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#### **IN-KIND**

Laurie and Jay Witt

Sally Yencken

Lyngso Garden Materials Inc. Stephen Buckhout

We have made every effort to ensure that our donor list is complete and accurate. Please notify us of any errors or omissions at kate@grassrootsecology.org.



## Our Team

We welcomed two new members to our growing Board of Directors!



I joined the Board at Grassroots Ecology to bring more awareness about my local Latinx community and assist in bringing us closer to serving, enjoying, and learning about the important work Grassroots Ecology undertakes."

Julio Calderon **Board Member** 



My mother used to



visit Redwood Creek to watch the restoration watch the restoration work going on. She'd report back on how the plants were doing, when people were out watering and weeding, and how ducks would paddle around in the creek. At the beginning, I didn't know this was Grassroots' project, but with my mom gone now, this is a fond memory that I thank Grassroots for making happen."

**Tina Hugg** Board Member

#### **Board Members**

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# Midpeninsula Regional Open Space District



#### Educate Enjoy Preserve Protect Restore

16



- Bear Creek Redwoods
- Coal Creek
- El Corte de Madera Creek
- El Sereno
- Foothills
- Fremont Older
- La Honda Creek
- Long Ridge
- Los Trancos
- Miramontes Ridge Monte Bello
- 12 Picchetti Ranch
- Pulgas Ridge
- Purisima Creek Redwoods 20
- 15 Rancho San Antonio
- Ravenswood
- 17 Russian Ridge
- 18 Saratoga Gap
- Sierra Azul

- Skyline Ridge

25 Tunitas Creek

26 Windy Hill

- St. Joseph's Hill
- Stevens Creek Shoreline Nature Area
- Teague Hill
- 24 Thornewood