

**Bay Trail Project
Funder Interview Report
December 30, 2024**

Overview

During the fall of 2024, the Metropolitan Transportation Commission (MTC) contracted Potrero Group to develop a concept paper highlighting the case for funding to integrate the Bay Trail Project's 501c(3) functions within a larger organization. This concept paper outlined how such an organization could assume advocacy responsibilities for completing the remaining sections of the trail around the Bay. Potrero Group then shared the concept paper with Bay Area environmental funders to collect feedback on its ideas and approaches.

Potrero Group met with eight Bay Area environmental funders to explore feedback on the concept paper. Funders agreed to participate in the calls with the understanding that their comments were not statements of institutional commitment but, rather, their personal opinions based on experience. Responses and themes from interviewees are summarized and aggregated; the individuals and their organizations are listed at the end of this document.

Based on these conversations, Potrero Group believes that 1–2 years of philanthropic “start-up” capital is available to support transitioning the current Bay Trail Project's functions (advocacy, fundraising, and project coordination) into a well-established Bay Area environmental or trail development organization. Assuming early momentum after integration, most funders agreed that this project could have much larger philanthropic potential because of its iconic nature and cross-region connectivity.

Funders expressed enthusiasm about the ideas, budget scale, and approach outlined in the concept paper. Funders were particularly enthusiastic about the project's direct links to contemporary funding goals to increase equity, access, climate resilience, and economic opportunity. For funders, there is a clear and achievable vision for an entire region connected by the Bay Trail, creating access to smaller trail networks, enhancing accessibility, and advancing important climate initiatives.

Interview Themes

Four primary themes emerged from Potrero Group's conversations with funders:

Fundability

The Bay Trail is a pathway between the past, present, and future, aligning residents, businesses, and organizations on the impact of outdoor recreation and environmental protection. For the scale of the impact, the initial costs of supporting the advocacy functions of the work are well within the feasibility range for potential funders. The

immediate connection that many funders have to the Bay, access to these beautiful natural spaces, and the vibrant community that convenes through the Bay Trail make this project of particular interest and importance. There are easily measurable impact outcomes that provide funders with assurance for initial investment. Respondents believe this project, if fostered within a well-established Bay Area nonprofit, will appeal to a broad range of funders (more details on potential funder segments below).

Alignment with Contemporary Funder Priorities

Environmental conservation and equitable access are currently two of funders' most important areas of interest. The Bay Trail actively promotes and contributes to initiatives that advance the local, regional, and state-wide priorities to protect our native species, waterways, and local communities. Funders are eager to support projects with multifaceted and scalable impacts that can increase equitable access for all local areas to outdoor space and safe recreation. The economic development that comes with more vibrant pathways, trails, and commuting routes benefits the community at many levels.

Opportunity for Leverage

The synergistic opportunity to leverage private philanthropy and government funding is powerful. Each funder group sees distinct advantages when other funders are invested in projects. The Bay Trail Project provides a powerful opportunity because robust state and federal funding sources are available in addition to private philanthropy. In addition, much of MTC's work on the trail could likely be considered for a match. Political and community support is necessary for the success of this project, and Bay Trail leverages and ensures that the priorities of both public and private funding sources are being advanced.

Equity and Equitable Access

Completing the Bay Trail will open access across the Bay in areas not yet experiencing the full benefits of safe pathways and outdoor spaces. Based on the Gap Analysis performed on the Bay Trail, the trail is yet to be completed, primarily along shores in underserved communities, reinforcing negative mental and physical wellbeing. By funding this project and supporting the partnership with a larger organization, funders are actively creating a lasting impact across nearly 500 miles of the Bay and ensuring that access to nature and connected routes are open to all.

Sources of Support

Responding enthusiastically to the ideas outlined in the concept paper, interviewees discussed groups of funders that are likely to support this project:

Traditional environmental funders

The climate focus and conservation priorities that the Bay Trail advances will attract funders with a more traditional environmental focus. Support for science-based protection of native species, delicate watersheds, and a strong sea wall is more relevant than ever as climate-related events affect communities locally and globally. Environmental funders may also lend technical assistance to the project.

Government funding sources

The Bay Trail Project is directly connected to the priorities of key government funders like the California Coastal Conservancy and potentially to federal funding sources like the Land Water Conservation Fund. The recent passage of Proposition 4, a \$10 billion bond measure, also provides a timely opportunity for significant additional funding for this project.

Equity-focused funders

Closing gaps in the trail aligns closely with the goals of equity-based funders, particularly in areas where access to safe outdoor space and walking paths is limited or unmaintained. Completing the Bay Trail ensures that every community along the Bay will have access to nature and its health and active transportation benefits. The 11th Hour Project (one of Eric and Wendy Schmidt's key philanthropic vehicles) and the Waverly Street Foundation were mentioned as potential equity-focused funders that should be approached to support this project.

Health funders

By increasing access to nature, outdoor recreation, and non-motorized commuting, the Bay Trail's completion strongly supports the priorities of health-focused foundations. The project's community health benefits are likely to draw the attention of funders like the California Wellness Foundation, which invests in projects with a large-scale impact on Californians' health.

Legacy Bay Area families

The Bay Area's natural areas and parks have received massive philanthropic investment from legacy families drawn to iconic, large-scale projects that build quality of life for all residents. Stunning restorations at Crissy Field, the Presidio, Lands End, Mt. Tamalpais, and many others were generously supported by the philanthropic support of civic leaders from the Haas, Fisher, Goldman, and Benioff families. Many interviewees believe that the vision for a completed Bay Trail is equally compelling and would attract robust funding from many of the region's most generous families.

Community foundations

The region has numerous community foundations with billions in assets that are targeted to Bay Area causes. Because the Bay Trail links so many of the region's communities, many interviewees believed that community foundations in the region would invest in this project. In fact, during the interviews, several specific donors with funds in the region's community foundations who have given to similar projects in the past were identified. These donors could likely be approached for start-up capital, which, if properly leveraged, could lead to larger gifts.

Next Steps

Given the overwhelmingly positive feedback on the concept paper, Potrero Group recommends that the Bay Trail Project Board of Directors and MTC begin conversations with Save the Bay, the Bay Area Ridge Trail Council, and other potential organizations to discuss integrating the Bay Trail Project's functions into a larger nonprofit home.

Bay Area philanthropists have demonstrated enormous generosity for visionary environmental projects led by strong organizations for decades. While assuming any new project involves financial risk and uncertainty, Potrero Group's finding that there is strong enthusiasm for this project among funders mitigates these risks.

Once an organization is selected to assume the Bay Trail Project's functions, Potrero Group recommends developing an operational business plan to refine the model outlined in the concept paper. We recommend continued engagement with regional funders and consider approaching funders for start-up capital once more details have been developed.