July 12, 2022

Honorable Board of Supervisors
Marin County Civic Center
San Rafael, CA 94903

SUBJECT: REQUEST TO AUTHORIZE PRESIDENT TO EXECUTE AGREEMENT GRANTING MARIN AGRICULTURAL LAND TRUST $1,817,300 IN MEASURE A FARMLAND PRESERVATION PROGRAM FUNDS FOR PURCHASE OF AN AGRICULTURAL CONSERVATION EASEMENT OVER MCDOWELL RANCH

Dear Board Members:

RECOMMENDATION:

1. Authorize President to execute grant agreement for APNs 100-080-32, 100-080-33, 100-080-34, and 100-080-35.

2. Authorize the Director of Finance to increase Measure A Fund 2560 expenditure appropriations within the Farmland Preservation Program (6402) with use of available Measure A Fund Balance (2560) by $1,817,300.

SUMMARY: Marin County Parks has received an application from Marin Agricultural Land Trust (MALT) requesting $1,817,300 in Measure A Farmland Preservation Program funds to purchase an agricultural conservation easement over the 723-acre McDowell Ranch located east of Tomales. McDowell Ranch would join a large swath of permanently protected properties encompassing approximately 9,806 acres stretching east to west in northern Marin County.

The McDowell Ranch is comprised of four assessor’s parcels operating as a single contiguous landscape unit, totaling approximately 723 acres. The ranch has been in active agricultural production for over 120 years and is managed as an organic grass-fed beef cattle operation.

The property constitutes one of the highest values, most significant, and most vulnerable properties in the County from an agricultural land and conservation perspective. These attributes make the property vulnerable to subdivision into ultra-high-end housing that would destroy irreplaceable open space in Marin. Measure A funds in support of a conservation easement acquisition would protect this land in perpetuity for Marin County: 1) no subdivision of the land can occur, 2) the continued stewardship of this landscape and active agricultural production in conformance with MALT’s Agricultural and Creek Conservation Management Plans ensure climate-forward and sustainable practices.
McDowell Ranch contains landscape of environmental and agricultural importance that is greatly at risk of future development. Placing a conservation easement on the McDowell Ranch would forever preserve 667 acres of perennial and annual grasslands (93%), 56 acres of coast oak woodland and California bay forest, and approximately 1.44 miles of the Stemple Creek watershed. The main channel of Stemple Creek bisects the northern parcels for approximately 1.44 miles. Preservation of the Stemple Creek watershed is of primary conservation value because it serves as the main tributary of Estero de San Antonio, which is considered by California Department of Fish and Game as one of the most significant habitats in the state. Conservation efforts in the Stemple Creek watershed are extensive though decentralized. The proposed conservation easement would continue these efforts by layering on a Creek Conservation Area Management Plan for the portion of the watershed on the McDowell property.

The conservation value of the McDowell Ranch is recognized further by its designations by the Department of Conservation and the Bay Area Conservation Lands Network: Nearly 100% (717 acres) of the ranch is considered Farmland of Local Importance according to the Department of Conservation’s Farmland Mapping and Monitoring data and 66% is classified as essential habitat by the Bay Area Conservation Lands Network.

Staff considers grant applications for funding from the Measure A Farmland Preservation Program on a first-come first-served basis and evaluates the merits of proposals based on criteria contained in the Marin County Agricultural Land Conservation Program. The creation of this program was authorized by your board on January 31, 2012. Additionally, as approved by Marin voters in 2012, twenty percent of Measure A funds are mandated to be used for the protection of Marin County farmland at risk of subdivision and development in order to preserve Marin’s working farms and ranches.

**FISCAL IMPACT:** There will be no increase to General Fund Net County Cost as a result of your Board’s action, as the purchase is fully funded through Measure A Funds. If approved, expenditure appropriations within Measure A, Fund 2560, Farmland Preservation Program, will be increased by $1,817,300 with use of available fund balance. The remaining balance in the Farmland Preservation Program will be approximately $8M.

Please feel free to contact us should you have any questions or concerns.

**REVIEWED BY:**

☑ County Administrator        ☐ N/A
☐ Department of Finance        ☐ N/A
☑ County Counsel               ☐ N/A
☐ Human Resources              ☐ N/A

Respectfully submitted,

Chris Chamberlain
Assistant Director

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