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OF SANTA CRUZ
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**Unprecedented Partnership Breaks Ground on
Highway 17 Wildlife Tunnel Project**

SANTA CRUZ, CALIFORNIA: On April 29 at 10:00 am, Graniterock, Caltrans, and the Land Trust of Santa Cruz County celebrated the official groundbreaking for the construction of the HW17 wildlife tunnel at Laurel Curve. The tunnel will provide long-ranging wildlife—most notably Santa Cruz mountain lions—with safe passage under the heavily trafficked highway.

An unprecedented partnership between the land conservation organization Land Trust of Santa Cruz County, state agencies Caltrans, and the Regional Transportation Commission, is responsible for the realization and success of the undercrossing project.

Speaking at the celebration was Land Trust Executive Director, Sarah Newkirk; County Supervisor and Santa Cruz County Regional Transportation Commissioner, Bruce McPherson; Assemblyman Mark Stone; Senator John Laird, Acting Caltrans Director, Steve Keck; Director of California Department of Fish and Wildlife, Charlton Bonham; and Natural Resources Secretary, Wade Crowfoot.

10 Years in the Making:

The research for the project began in 2012. Working closely with the UCSC Puma Project and Pathways for Wildlife, the Land Trust collected information from collared pumas, wildlife cameras, and animal-vehicle collision data. Deer, bobcats, foxes, and mountain lions have all been caught on camera trying to cross.

However, unlike other animals, "the Santa Cruz Mountain Lion population has a low effective genetic population size and is at risk of genetic isolation," shares Pathways for Wildlife's, Wildlife Ecologist and GIS Analyst, Tanya Diamond, "it is more critical than ever to create a safe passage under Highway 17 for facilitating mountain lion movement between sub-populations in the south."



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Research by the Santa Cruz Puma Project's biologist, Chris Wilmers, shows both extensive use of the area by mountain lions – and the deaths of three of them in recent years. Wilmers called the Laurel Curve area "the best opportunity for maintaining puma connectivity across Highway 17 in Santa Cruz County."

The results of the five-year study identified Laurel Curve as the ideal location for the crossing. In 2014 the Land Trust took the first step by protecting a 10-acre property off Laurel Road. The Land Trust has since protected an additional 790 acres around the site.

"The science was clear and compelling, and we knew that we needed to secure the land on both sides of the highway to ensure the success of a crossing. It was hard work, but it is so exciting to see the project get off the ground," said Sarah Newkirk, Executive Director of the Land Trust of Santa Cruz County.

But it would take more than land protection. Senator John Laird (then Natural Resources Secretary), Assemblymember Mark Stone, and Caltrans leadership and staff were pivotal in establishing the funding mechanisms that would allow for and help fund the project. "As Secretary for Natural Resources, a Santa Cruz resident and long-time driver of Highway 17, I am intimately familiar with the hazards to motorists and wildlife at Laurel Curve," shared Senator Laird, "I was pleased to play a role in equipping the state with the right policy for the successful building of the wildlife crossing. This has been a partnership of many people and organizations, and I look forward to celebrating the start of this long-awaited project."

The unique partnership demonstrated by these four agencies has created a new model for conservation and wildlife protection projects in California. Their model paved the way for SB790, which was signed into law late last year. SB790 supports the implementation of wildlife crossings statewide using the mitigation incentive framework pioneered through this project.

The stretch of highway at Laurel Curve is built over large natural drainage, creating the ideal place to install a large box culvert. The roadway above will serve as a bridge, with the area underneath becoming the wildlife crossing. The undercrossing is wider and therefore more welcoming for wildlife than a tunnel. "We're proud to play a key role in making this project a reality for the community of Santa Cruz County," said Rachel Reed, Graniterock's biological resources project manager. "As a company, we are strong supporters of new infrastructure that delivers environmental



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benefits as well as improves safety for motorists through this heavily traveled corridor."

The project was funded through SCCRTC Measure D, private fundraising by the Land Trust of Santa Cruz County, and 2.1 million in construction support from Caltrans. "Thanks to the voters of Santa Cruz County, the RTC is able to provide \$5 million in Measure D funds for this transformative project. Measure D included this crossing to address both safety and sustainability," said RTC Executive Director Guy Preston. "This project demonstrates a culture of environmental stewardship while also reducing collisions for our community that travels on Highway 17. Thanks also to the Land Trust and Caltrans for providing funding and expertise necessary to align transportation goals with wildlife connectivity."

Social Impact company, Virtual Planet Technologies, has created a virtual reality experience that will allow users to be transported to the project location from anywhere. The one-of-a-kind experience will give groundbreaking attendees the opportunity to experience the impact of the crossing brought to life. The experience entitled 'Creating Safe Passage' will transport users to a local forest in California, where they will observe the landscape being transformed and become virtual spectators, watching wildlife roam through the area. Virtual Planet's cofounder Juliano Calil adds:

"Virtual Reality is a unique tool that enables users to experience new situations in an immersive, interactive, and safe learning environment. In this experience, users are immediately transported to the Santa Cruz mountains, where they watch deer, raccoons, and mountain lions going by. But don't worry, the animals won't be disturbed." You can view the virtual reality experience through the Land Trust website, <https://www.landtrustsantacruz.org/video/>.

Special thank you to the many supporters of this project: UC Santa Cruz Puma Project, Pathways for Wildlife, Senator John Laird, Assemblymember Mark Stone, CA Department of Fish and Wildlife, Wildlife Conservation Board, Coastal Conservancy, Gordon and Betty Moore Foundation, and the Members of the Land Trust of Santa Cruz County.

The undercrossing is scheduled for completion by the end of 2022.