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**Testimony of Janet McBride, Executive Director
Bay Area Ridge Trail Council**

**Written Testimony Submitted to the House Committee on Natural Resources
Subcommittee on Federal Lands**

**Legislative Hearing on H.R. 7254, the “Bay Area Ridge National Scenic Trail Feasibility
Study”**

Chairman Tiffany, Ranking Member Neguse, and Members of the Subcommittee:

Thank you for the opportunity to submit this written testimony in strong support of H.R. 7254, a bill to amend the National Trails System Act to direct the Secretary of the Interior to conduct a study on the feasibility of designating the Bay Area Ridge Trail as a National Scenic Trail.

We express our gratitude to Representative Jared Huffman for introducing this vital legislation, as well as to the co-sponsors from the entire Bay Area congressional delegation, and California Senators Alex Padilla and Adam Schiff for their coordinated leadership.

My name is Janet McBride, and I have had the privilege of serving as the Executive Director of the Bay Area Ridge Trail Council for the past 20 years. Prior to my time with the Council, I spent nearly a decade managing the regional San Francisco Bay Trail project, giving me 30 consecutive years of dedicated professional experience planning, building, and safeguarding long-distance trails in Northern California.

During my tenure as Executive Director, the Bay Area Ridge Trail has grown by more than 100 dedicated miles, bridging major gaps across complex public and private landscapes. To steward this growing regional asset, we have systematically scaled the institutional capacity of our non-profit organization. Over the last two decades, we have transformed the Council from a small grassroots operation into a highly professionalized, diverse team of 11 full-time staff members who specialize in trail planning, geographical mapping, data management, community advocacy and engagement, and environmental stewardship. This organizational growth ensures that the Council possesses the internal expertise, maturity, and resources necessary to actively assist and collaborate with the Department of the Interior in conducting this feasibility study.

I. Organizational Mission and Vision

The Bay Area Ridge Trail Council was founded in 1987 to carry out a bold and inspiring regional vision. Our formal mission is **to plan, promote, and sustain a connected hiking, cycling, and equestrian trail on the ridgelines around San Francisco Bay—linking people, parks, and open space for today and future generations.**

Our founding vision traces back to park visionary William Penn Mott, Jr., who served as the 12th Director of the National Park Service, as well as general manager of the East Bay Regional Park District and director of California State Parks. In the 1960s, while looking out over the ridges encircling the San Francisco Bay, Mott envisioned a continuous hill-and-ridge path that would completely loop the metropolitan region, providing close-to-home wilderness immersion for urban communities.

Today, the Council works tirelessly alongside public agencies, land trusts, and community advocates to realize this grand vision piece-by-piece, stitching together a world-class, continuous, 550-mile multi-use ring that represents the ultimate intersection of urban proximity and natural grandeur.

II. The Bay Area Ridge Trail: A Regional & National Treasure

The Bay Area Ridge Trail is an exceptional non-motorized, multi-use pathway designed for hikers, runners, mountain bicyclists, and equestrians.

- **Current Scale and Scope:** The planned alignment encompasses a 550-mile loop. Decades of disciplined, grass-roots collaboration have successfully dedicated and opened **over 415 miles** of the trail to the public.
- **Unprecedented Regional Access:** The trail physically travels through **9 counties and 24 distinct towns and cities.**
- **Proximity to Population Centers:** It is a crown jewel of accessibility. Over **2.5 million people live within just 2 miles** of the Ridge Trail. For a metropolitan area populated by nearly 8 million residents, this trail serves as an immediate, equitable portal to physical health, mental respite, and outdoor recreation.
- **Peak Geography:** The trail follows the dramatic outer ridgelines of the region, scaling spectacular terrain that includes iconic landmarks such as Mount St. Helena (4,342 feet), Mount Umunhum (3,486 feet), and Monument Peak (2,594 feet), offering sweeping views of the entire Pacific coastline and San Francisco Bay ecosystem.

III. Geography of the Ridge Trail: A Continuous Loop

The planned 550-mile alignment of the Bay Area Ridge Trail forms a continuous loop over the ridgelines that frame the San Francisco Bay Area. Geographically, the trail extends south near the City of Gilroy, traveling upward along the spine of the San Francisco Peninsula. It moves directly through the heart of San Francisco and makes a world-renowned crossing over the Golden Gate. From there, the trail winds northward through the rugged hills of Marin County,

crossing into the scenic vistas of Sonoma and Napa counties before reaching its northernmost heights at Calistoga and Mount St. Helena.

The loop then pivots southward, traversing the high ridgelines of the East Bay, crossing the historic Carquinez Strait, and running past the vast East Bay regional ridgelines and wilderness preserves. Finally, it drops back down into the South Bay, passing San Jose to complete this unmatched 550-mile circle of Northern California.

IV. The Intersection of Local and Federal Lands

The Bay Area Ridge Trail is an exceptional non-motorized, multi-use pathway designed for hikers, runners, mountain bicyclists, and equestrians.

- **Current Scale and Scope:** Decades of disciplined, grass-roots collaboration have successfully dedicated and opened over 415 miles of the trail to the public.
- **Regional Access:** The trail route travels through 9 counties and 24 distinct towns and cities.
- **Proximity to Population Centers:** It is a crown jewel of accessibility. Over 2.5 million people live within just 2 miles of the Ridge Trail. For a metropolitan area populated by nearly 8 million residents, this trail serves as an immediate, equitable portal to physical health, mental respite, and outdoor recreation.
- **Integration with the National Park System:** Highlighting its clear national value, the trail explicitly traverses five prominent federal public land units managed by the federal government:
 1. Golden Gate National Recreation Area (including parks in Marin, San Francisco and San Mateo)
 2. Fort Point National Historic Site
 3. John Muir National Historic Site
 4. Muir Woods National Monument
 5. The Presidio of San Francisco

By stitching these national treasures together with 145 distinct local and state parks, the Ridge Trail forms an invaluable bridge between federal public lands and local communities.

V. A Model of Robust Public-Private Partnership

The success of the Bay Area Ridge Trail is anchored in its network of collaborative relationships. The Council does not act alone; it operates as an essential hub coordinating a vast ecosystem of land managers, community volunteers, and municipal stakeholders.

The Ridge Trail operates and sustains the trail by:

- **Partnering with Land Managers:** The Council actively partners with **over 40 land managers**, including local open space districts, municipal parks, land trusts, California

State Parks, and federal entities like the National Park Service (including the Golden Gate National Recreation Area).

- **Connecting Public Lands:** The trail effectively links and weaves together **145 distinct parks and protected public open spaces**, creating crucial regional connectivity that benefits both human recreation and wildlife migration corridors.
- **Grassroots Stewardship:** In 2025 alone, **500 dedicated community volunteers contributed 2,000 hours** of hands-on labor side-by-side with our agency partners to design, build, and maintain trail segments.

This deep operational integration ensures that the groundwork for a federal feasibility study is already in place. The data, mapping, stakeholder relationships, and regional leadership required to execute the study are highly mature and ready to be leveraged by the Department of the Interior.

VI. Meeting the Criteria for National Scenic Trail Designation

National Scenic Trails (NST) are extended pathways of exceptional natural beauty and significant national value. Currently, only 11 routes nationwide hold this prestigious distinction. The Bay Area Ridge Trail is a natural fit to become America's next National Scenic Trail, as it meets or exceeds all federal statutory benchmarks:

1. **Extended Route:** At a planned 550 miles (with over 415 miles active), it far exceeds the 100-mile long-distance threshold required for national consideration.
2. **Ecological and Landform Diversity:** The trail provides an unparalleled cross-section of Northern California's natural heritage, traversing diverse ecosystems including ancient redwood forests, unique geological formations, coastal marshes, oak grasslands, riparian rivers, and high-altitude mountain ridgelines.
3. **Connectivity to Regional Networks:** As detailed in H.R. 7254, the trail seamlessly intersects with other major regional networks, such as the San Francisco Bay Trail, the Napa Valley Vine Trail, and the Coyote Creek Trail, the Juan Bautista de Anza National Historic Trail, and the East Bay Skyline National Recreation Trail, allowing for expansive, continuous, multi-day trekking and alternative active transportation.

VII. The Critical Importance of the Feasibility Study

Authorizing this study via H.R. 7254 is a necessary, prudent, and non-binding first step. The study will provide a vital framework to:

- **Analyze Strategic Gaps:** It will bring federal expertise to assist local stakeholders in evaluating how to close the remaining 135 miles of gaps across complex transportation corridors and land interfaces.
- **Spur the Outdoor Economy:** Formalizing this pathway toward national status will elevate the region's visibility as a world-class recreation destination, providing a powerful economic boost to local businesses and sustainable tourism across Northern California.

- **Ensure Local Autonomy:** In alignment with standard National Heritage and National Trail study frameworks, this process relies entirely on voluntary collaboration. It creates no new federal regulatory mandates, respects local management, and protects private property rights.

VIII. Congressional Consensus and Advocacy Readiness

A definitive indicator of this legislation's readiness for rapid enactment is the historic level of political consensus surrounding H.R. 7254. Every single one of the 12 members representing the San Francisco Bay Area in the House of Representatives has signed on as a co-sponsor of the bill. A companion bill has been introduced in the Senate by California Senators Alex Padilla and Adam Schiff.

This alignment did not occur by accident; it is the direct result of months of proactive outreach and liaison work orchestrated by the Bay Area Ridge Trail Council, with the support of Representative Huffman. The Council engaged each of the 12 congressional districts individually, presenting comprehensive geographical data and demonstrating how the 550-mile trail network directly enhances the specific communities, open spaces, and local economies within their respective borders.

In a legislative environment where land use, study authorizations, and conservation bills are frequently scrutinized for local friction, H.R. 7254 demonstrates consensus. The fact that the entire 12-member regional delegation is unified behind this effort proves that potential local management questions have already been successfully aligned by the Council.

IX. Broad Land Manager Consensus and Support

Further reinforcing the readiness of this initiative, the Council has conducted extensive, proactive surveys of key land managers, regional stakeholders, and local administrators across the entire 550-mile footprint. This outreach included county governments, municipal leaders, local park authorities, and independent open space districts.

The feedback received has been clear and definitive: there is overwhelming support among these public agencies for the execution of this federal feasibility study. Because the trail intersects a complex mosaic of jurisdictions, demonstrating that local land managers are enthusiastically welcoming this process ensures the Subcommittee that the study will proceed smoothly.

XI. Demonstration of Study Readiness and Practicality

We assure the Subcommittee that the execution of this feasibility study is practical and realistic. Because the Bay Area Ridge Trail Council has spent nearly four decades as a centralized hub for regional trail planning, managing spatial data, mapping corridors, and coordinating operations with our 40+ land management partners, the federal government will not be starting from scratch.

The foundational data, gap analysis study, and community relationships required to complete this study are highly mature, vetted, and immediately accessible. Furthermore, there is no known local opposition to protecting or evaluating this trail for National Scenic Trail status. Rather, there is a shared regional anticipation to see this deeply cherished and existing resource evaluated on a national scale.

XII. Conclusion

The Bay Area Ridge Trail represents the convergence of natural beauty, regional volunteerism, urban proximity, and history. It embodies the exact spirit of the National Trails System Act: bringing wilderness experiences into close harmony with where millions of Americans live, work, and play.

A federal feasibility study is a prudent, well-earned, and universally supported next step for this iconic asset. For these reasons, we respectfully urge the Subcommittee on Federal Lands to support and advance H.R. 7254.

Thank you again for your time, consideration, and dedication to expanding public access to America's extraordinary outdoor landscapes.