

COASTAL CONSERVANCY

Staff Recommendation
May 19, 2011

**SANTA ANA RIVER PARKWAY
ORANGE COUNTY PHASE II**

File No. 11-024-01
Project Manager: Greg Gauthier

RECOMMENDED ACTION: Authorize disbursement of up to two million dollars (\$2,000,000) to implement coastal access along the Santa Ana River Parkway in Orange County.

LOCATION: Santa Ana River Parkway, along the Santa Ana River in Orange County.

PROGRAM CATEGORY: Public Access

EXHIBITS

- Exhibit 1: [Project Location and Map](#)
 - Exhibit 2: [Project Map with Funding Sources and Completion Dates](#)
 - Exhibit 3: [Project Images: Gypsum Canyon Road to County Line](#)
 - Exhibit 4: [Engineer's Report and Alignment Study](#)
 - Exhibit 5: [Project Letters](#)
-

RESOLUTION AND FINDINGS:

Staff recommends that the State Coastal Conservancy adopt the following resolution pursuant to Sections 31400 *et. seq.* of the Public Resources Code:

“The State Coastal Conservancy hereby authorizes disbursement of an amount not to exceed two million dollars (\$2,000,000) to the County of Orange for final design, engineering, environmental review and permit applications for projects to complete a three mile coastal access trail segment that extends from the Gypsum Canyon Road to the county line.

This authorization is subject to the condition that prior to disbursement of funds to the grantee, the Conservancy’s Executive Officer shall review and approve in writing a final work program, including a budget and schedule, and any contractors the grantee proposes to employ for the project.”

Staff further recommends that the Conservancy adopt the following findings:

“Based on the accompanying staff report and attached exhibits, the State Coastal Conservancy hereby finds that:

1. The proposed authorization is consistent with the Project Selection Criteria and Guidelines last updated by the Conservancy on June 4, 2009.
2. The proposed authorization is consistent with the purposes and objectives of Chapter 9 of Division 21 of the Public Resources Code, regarding the establishment of a system of public accessways to and along the California Coast.
3. The proposed project will serve greater than local needs.”

PROJECT SUMMARY:

For more than fifty years, trail users and community leaders sought to complete the Santa Ana River Trail and Parkway (“the Parkway”) from the crest of the San Bernardino Mountains to the coast near Huntington Beach. Portions of the Parkway were designated a National Recreation Trail in November 1976. When completed, it will be one of the longest urban recreation and river parkways in the United States. The Parkway will be a multi-use trail, serving pedestrians, cyclists and equestrians. It will connect a completed section of the California Coastal Trail to inland communities. The trail will go from the beach, through urban areas of Orange County and the Inland Empire up to San Bernardino National Forest wilderness areas. The completed trail will connect three counties and 14 cities. More than seven million people live in the three counties that the trail connects. The Inland Empire is one of the fastest growing regions of California and is one of the areas in the nation hardest hit by the recession.

The completed Parkway will be about 100 miles long and will include 18 miles of dirt multi-use trail in the National Forest and about 82 miles of paved trail along the lower reaches of the river. About half of the Parkway has been completed or is under construction. As shown in Exhibit 2, most of the trail in Orange County is complete although there is a three mile gap at the east end of the county, near the Riverside and San Bernardino County lines. There is a 22.5 mile gap in Riverside County and there are about 12 miles of trail left to be constructed in San Bernardino County.

The Parkway and river trail will connect more than 50 parks, historic sites, picnic areas, education facilities, forests, wilderness areas, hiking trails, campgrounds, nature preserves, and equestrian centers along the Santa Ana River. It is being designed to serve user groups with a wide range of interests and abilities ranging from casual pedestrian and family audiences to racing cyclists, commuters, equestrians, and hikers. The trail will be designed in compliance with the Americans with Disabilities Act.

The Santa Ana River Trail and Parkway Partnership (“the Parkway Partnership”) is a collaboration of the three counties, multiple cities and the Wildlands Conservancy, a nonprofit organization, created to coordinate building and administering the trail as a regional resource. One of the primary hurdles to completing the Parkway has been a lack of consistent funding for trail projects. Proposition 84 included a \$45 million dollar allocation to the Conservancy for projects to “expand and improve” the Parkway. These projects must be developed “in consultation with local government agencies participating in the development of the Santa Ana River Parkway.”

The County of Orange has completed most of the Parkway from the coast to the boundary with Riverside and San Bernardino Counties. However, to connect Orange County's trail and bikeway with upstream sections, the County must build three miles of the Parkway between Gypsum Canyon Road and the county line. As shown in the images in Exhibit 3, this project is in the Santa Ana River Canyon, where the river is constrained between the Chino Hills and the Santa Ana Mountains. Highway 91 runs along the south side of the river further constraining the proposed Parkway. The three counties meet at a single point, just downstream of the Prado Dam. The proposed trail will cross from Orange County into Riverside County and continue through Riverside County around the Prado Basin.

While this section is only three miles long, there are a number of constraints that make completion of the trail very complicated and potentially very expensive. The County has identified six projects to complete this remaining section of the Parkway, including one road under-crossing and three bridges spanning the Santa Ana River. The proposed bridges will also connect the Parkway to Chino Hills State Park.

Orange County completed the development of the conceptual trail alignment alternatives, design review and public outreach in spring, 2011. They produced an Engineer's Report and Alignment Study (Exhibit 4), and an Initial Study for environmental review as part of concept development phase of the project. The recommended authorization will provide funds to the County to complete the Orange County portion of the Parkway trail and bikeway final design and engineering, environmental review for project permitting, and construction cost budgets to complete these Parkway segments.

Orange County Public Works will oversee the planning project on behalf of Orange County Parks (OC Parks). Once the trail and bikeway are constructed, the improvements and operational maintenance will be turned over to OC Parks and Orange County Public Works will then conclude its role with the project. OC Parks operates regional recreational facilities and manages 57,000 acres of parkland and open space including regional parks, wilderness parks, nature preserves, recreational trails, historic sites, and harbors and beaches.

Site Description:

The Santa Ana River watershed drains approximately 3,200 square miles, including portions of San Bernardino, Riverside and Orange counties. According to 2010 Census data the population of Riverside County is 2,189, 641. The population of San Bernardino County is just over two million and the population of Orange County is just over three million people. Currently the state's total population is estimated to be 37.3 million; thus just under 20% of all the people in the state live in these three counties.

The Santa Ana River watershed supports hundreds of species of birds, fish and amphibians, including more than a dozen protected rare or endangered species such as Least Bells vireo and the Santa Ana Sucker.

The upper portion of the watershed is in the San Bernardino National Forest, the middle section crosses the Inland Empire, through the urbanizing areas of San Bernardino and Riverside

Counties. Throughout this region, the Santa Ana River is a wide, braided channel with flood control levees protecting the urban development. In some places, the river is a mile wide.

Near the western boundary of San Bernardino and Riverside counties, the river passes through the Prado Basin. The Prado Basin is a flood control basin, a habitat area and a water treatment wetland. The Orange County Water District owns 2,150 acres in the basin, which is in Riverside County. It operates a treatment wetland to reduce nitrogen levels in the river water prior to using that water for groundwater recharge downstream. Prado Dam was built at a narrow point along the river, where the river flows between the Chino Hills and the Santa Ana Mountains.

Below the Prado Dam, through the Santa Ana Canyon, there is a short section of relatively natural riparian corridor, with natural channel bottom and riparian vegetation. Below this section, through most of Orange County, the Santa Ana River is a concrete-encased flood control channel which leads to the coast. The mouth of the Santa Ana River is between Huntington Beach and Newport Beach and is part of the 1,000 acre Orange Coast River Park.

Project History:

Since the 1950's, citizens groups have worked with leaders in the watershed to develop a 100 mile trail running adjacent to the river. These efforts sought to create a lively parkway connecting population centers, urban commuter routes, playgrounds, schools, ball fields, commercial centers, golf courses, equestrian facilities and neighborhoods to natural areas with a linear trail along the river corridor. In this vision, the river parkway would be a safe, multi-use trail network linked to other parts of the watershed.

This vision for the Santa Ana River Parkway proceeded in fits and starts for more than 40 years. Portions of the trail were developed independently in the three counties through which the river passed. Over time, local leaders in the watershed realized that a regional approach was necessary to complete the trail. A regional approach would allow the sharing of resources and ideas and development of a common vision for the entire trail. In 1990, the Counties of San Bernardino, Riverside, and Orange, along with 14 cities and various agencies came together to adopt the "Plan for the Santa Ana River Trail" which provided a road map for completing the trail along its entirety. The over-arching goal of the plan was to provide a continuous, multi-use, trail system along the entire length of the Santa Ana River Corridor. Over the next decade, efforts to complete the trail continued at different rates within each of the respective jurisdictions. Some moved forward but progress stalled in many jurisdictions due to lack of funds.

In May of 2005, with the support of the Wildlands Conservancy, a nonprofit organization, local elected officials and state legislators from the watershed met to explore the possibility of state support for the Santa Ana River Trail and Parkway. At this initial meeting Supervisor John Tavaglione of Riverside County suggested development of a Partnership Action Plan to coordinate planning efforts and leverage funding and resources by local entities throughout the watershed. In August of 2005, the group determined that a Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) was the appropriate vehicle to formalize their commitment and in July of 2006, a final MOU was signed and adopted by the participants including the Counties of Orange, Riverside, San Bernardino, the Santa Ana Watershed Project Authority and the Wildlands Conservancy.

The Conservancy approved a \$550,000 planning grant to Orange County in December, 2007. Since then the members of the Partnership have worked cooperatively and coordinated efforts to complete the conceptual development and trail alignments for the uncompleted segments of the Parkway.

PROJECT FINANCING:

Coastal Conservancy	\$2,000,000
Total Project Cost	\$2,000,000

Proposition 84 included a \$45 million dollar allocation to the Coastal Conservancy for projects to “expand and improve” the Parkway. These projects must be developed “in consultation with local government agencies participating in the development of the Santa Ana River Parkway.” Proposition 84 further specified that at least \$10 million of the Parkway funds would be spent in each of the three counties. Consistent with the bond language, the recommended action provides a planning grant to Orange County to prepare projects for implementation. The proposed projects were developed in partnership with the local governments participating in the development of the Parkway.

While there are no matching funds identified for these specific projects, significant matching funds were already spent completing the Santa Ana River Trail. As shown in Exhibit 5, more than \$50,000,000 in private funding has matched a total of \$15,000,000 from the local governments and approximately \$8,000,000 in federal funds. It is expected that the entire Parkway will cost approximately \$118,000,000 to complete.

CONSISTENCY WITH CONSERVANCY’S ENABLING LEGISLATION:

The proposed project will help implement the Santa Ana River Trail and Parkway which will become a major inland trail connecting to the California Coastal Trail. The project is consistent with the provisions of Chapter 9 of Division 21 of the Public Resources Code, Sections 31400 et. seq.. Section 31409 states that the Conservancy “may award grants and provide assistance to public agencies and nonprofit organizations to establish and expand those inland trail systems that may be linked to the California Coastal Trail.” Section 31400.1 states that the Conservancy may award grants to any public agency for public access purposes to the coast if the accessway serves more than local public interest; this project will serve almost 20% of the entire state’s population in three large counties.

CONSISTENCY WITH CONSERVANCY’S 2007 STRATEGIC PLAN GOAL(S) & OBJECTIVE(S):

Consistent with **Goal 1, Objective 1E** of the Conservancy’s 2007 Strategic Plan, the proposed project will develop plans for approximately 3 miles of trails and parkways along the Santa Ana River that will connect inland populations to the coast.

**CONSISTENCY WITH CONSERVANCY'S
PROJECT SELECTION CRITERIA & GUIDELINES:**

The proposed project is consistent with the Conservancy's Project Selection Criteria and Guidelines last updated by the Conservancy on June 4, 2009 in the following respects:

Required Criteria

1. **Promotion of the Conservancy's statutory programs and purposes:** See the "Consistency with Conservancy's Enabling Legislation" section above.
2. **Consistency with purposes of the funding source:** See the "Project Financing" section above.
3. **Support of the public:** The Parkway project is widely supported by local organizations and elected officials, including Senator Diane Feinstein, Representative Ken Calvert, Senator Robert Dutton, Senator Gloria Negrete McCleod, California State Parks, the Counties of Orange, Riverside, and San Bernardino, the Wildlands Conservancy, the Santa Ana Watershed Project Authority, the Flood Control Districts of Orange, Riverside, and San Bernardino Counties, the Orange County Water District, the US Army Corps of Engineers, Riverside Bicycle Club, Trails 4 All, the Riverside Land Conservancy, equestrian groups and others. Project Letters are provided in Exhibit 5.
4. **Location:** The proposed project is located along the Santa Ana River and will help to complete a 100 mile trail that will connect the Coastal Trail to the San Bernardino Mountains.
5. **Need:** As described above, there has been a vision of completing the Parkway for more than fifty years. During the last few years, significant political support and regional coordination was established with the goal of completing trail construction. Funding for trail construction is one of the key factors needed to complete the trail. With the funding allocated in Proposition 84, the Parkway planning is progressing rapidly.
6. **Greater-than-local interest:** Portions of the Parkway were designated a National Recreation Trail in November 1976 linking the San Bernardino Mountains to the Pacific Ocean. The National Park Service has indicated its interest in designating the entire trail, once completed, as a National Recreation Trail. When complete, it will be one of the longest urban recreation river parkways in the United States. Just under one-fifth of all the people in the state (approximately seven million people) live in the three counties served by this trail.
7. **Sea level rise vulnerability:** The project area is not vulnerable to sea level rise due to the project area's distance from the coast.

Additional Criteria

9. **Resolution of more than one issue:** The Parkway will provide recreational and transportation benefits to the residents of Orange County and the Inland Empire. The trail will provide urban populations with access to natural areas along the river, to the Coast and National Forests, and to many cultural and historical sites adjacent to the river. Trails development will be balanced with natural resource protection and flood management along the river.
10. **Leverage:** See the “Project Financing” section, above.
13. **Readiness:** The conceptual planning and trail alignment alternatives are complete and the County of Orange is prepared to begin immediately with the final design, engineering and environmental review phase for the three miles of trail gap.
14. **Realization of prior Conservancy goals:** Completion of the Parkway will advance the Conservancy’s long-held goal of increasing public access to the Coast. The proposed trail will provide bicycle, pedestrian and equestrian access to the coast. The trail potentially serves millions of residents within these counties. Completion of the entire trail will benefit previous Conservancy projects at the mouth of the Santa Ana River, including work at the Huntington Beach Wetlands, Orange Coast River Park and Fairview Park.
16. **Cooperation:** The Santa Ana River Trail and Parkway Partnership is a unique example of regional coordination and collaboration among the agencies and stakeholders created by a Memorandum of Understanding. The Santa Ana River Trail and Parkway Partnership was created to coordinate building and administering the trail as a regional resource and to manage and maintain the trail cooperatively across jurisdictional boundaries in perpetuity. The Partnership is comprised of elected officials from Orange, Riverside, and San Bernardino Counties, cities within the watershed, Executive Officers from the Santa Ana Watershed Project Authority, and the Wildlands Conservancy.

COMPLIANCE WITH CEQA:

The proposed project involves planning design and engineering and environmental review and is therefore statutorily exempt from review under the California Environmental Quality Act under Title 14 California Code of Regulations (CCR) Section 15262. Upon approval, staff will file a notice of exemption for the project.