

COASTAL CONSERVANCY

Staff Recommendation
January 23, 2014

SAN DIEGO RIVER TRAIL PLANNING – GRANT PARK

Project No. 13-040-01
Project Manager: Peter S. Brand

RECOMMENDED ACTION: Authorization to disburse up to one hundred fifty six thousand two hundred fifty dollars (\$156,250) to the San Diego River Conservancy (“SDRC”) to complete planning of the Grant Park segment of the San Diego River Trail and Discovery Center.

LOCATION: City of San Diego, County of San Diego

PROGRAM CATEGORY: Public Access

EXHIBITS

Exhibit 1: [Project Location and Site Maps](#)

Exhibit 2: [Project Photos and Site Plan](#)

Exhibit 3: [Project Letters](#)

RESOLUTION AND FINDINGS:

Staff recommends that the State Coastal Conservancy adopt the following resolution pursuant to Sections 31400-31410 of the Public Resources Code:

“The State Coastal Conservancy hereby authorizes the disbursement of up to one hundred fifty six thousand two hundred fifty dollars (\$156,250) to the San Diego River Conservancy (“SDRC”) to complete permits and environmental documentation necessary to construct the Grant Park segment of the San Diego River Trail and Discovery Center.”

Prior to the disbursement of any Conservancy funds, SDRC shall submit for review and approval of the Executive Officer of the Conservancy a work program, budget, schedule, and the names of any contractors to be employed in carrying out the work.”

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 project is consistent with the current Project Selection Criteria and Guidelines.

2. The proposed authorization is consistent with the purposes and objectives of Chapter 9 of Division 21 of the Public Resources Code, regarding a system of public accessways to and along the coast.
3. The proposed project would serve a greater-than-local need.”

PROJECT SUMMARY:

Staff recommends that the Conservancy authorize the disbursement of up to one hundred fifty six thousand two hundred fifty dollars (\$156,250) to the San Diego River Conservancy (“SDRC”) to complete permits and environmental documentation necessary for eventual construction of the Grant Park segment of the San Diego River Trail and Discovery Center.

The proposed project includes extending the San Diego River Trail through the site and creating a river-centric park, education and community center. The property is in the heart of Mission Valley, located at the northeast corner of Qualcomm Way and Camino del Rio North, easily accessible by foot, bicycle, trolley, bus and automobile. (See Exhibit 1).

The San Diego River runs through some of the most urbanized communities of San Diego, and has the potential to provide opportunities for nature discovery and outdoor recreation to surrounding park-deficient communities. The River and its environs is the largest natural area in the Mission Valley. In May 2009 a donation agreement with a longstanding San Diegan family for 17 acres of undeveloped land along the River, the proposed Grant Park, was signed. A shared vision was created with the family, the community, environmental interests, and The San Diego River Park Foundation. Finally, the San Diego River would have a center at Grant Park where people could experience the river and enjoy the benefits of being in nature, serving as a model of how future development in Mission Valley could be transformed to embrace the San Diego River. (See Exhibit 2).

A primary mission of the San Diego River Conservancy is to develop a continuous trail from the ocean to the river headwaters, approximately fifty miles, linking the communities of Ocean Beach and Lakeside. SDRC has given first priority to the lower thirty miles of trail. Twelve miles of the trail have been completed.

Phase I of this project is to obtain permitting for the Discovery Center site and [segment #16 of the San Diego River Trail](#). A donation agreement is in place for this property, which has an estimated value of \$10 million. For efficiency, funding for planning and permitting for the Discovery Center and segment #16 of the San Diego River Trail are sought at this time. The San Diego River Conservancy considers the permitting for the whole facility as its contributing share of the entire project which is consistent with The San Diego River Conservancy’s strategic plan and endorsed by its Governing Board. When the permits are received grading and site preparation will occur. This will allow the trail to be built even if the funds to construct the entire Discovery Center have not been secured.

The Discovery Center facility is planned with 9,000 square feet of indoor space for meetings and gatherings, two dedicated research rooms for students, a classroom, interpretive area and supporting space. The goal is to have a continuum of opportunities to encourage young people

to explore education and careers in science, engineering, math and related fields, while providing a unique site-based experience to learn along and in the San Diego River.

The San Diego River Park Foundation has agreed to operate and maintain the Center. It will develop programs to provide focused activities for families with children in 4th – 8th grades as well as programs for people of all ages.

Site Description:

This 17 acre site is located in the heart of San Diego in Mission Valley. (Exhibit 1). While the surrounding community is densely developed the site remains undeveloped and the San Diego River runs through it. The land is currently owned by the Grant Family, but a donation agreement has been signed and the ownership and management of the site will transfer to the San Diego River Park Foundation before the project is complete. The building and parking area footprint will be limited as much as possible to the disturbed portion of the site, on the southwest side of the property. The portion of the site in the floodway, as well as much of the eastern section of the site, will remain free from permanent construction to protect the habitat values. Much of the site has important habitat, including open water, aquatic vegetation, marsh, riparian woodland and scrub areas. Some areas are disturbed and restoration is planned to remove non-native vegetation. Mapping of the site’s biological resources has been completed.

Project History:

When the [San Diego River Park Conceptual Plan](#) was completed in June 2002, it envisioned a completed River Trail through Mission Valley as part of a regional River Trail system. The Trail was designed to “provide additional opportunities for recreational areas and trails, and preserve open space for public access”. The Conceptual Plan also envisioned the River Park system as a connected and cohesive recreational system.

A few years after the [Conceptual Plan](#) was completed The San Diego River Park Foundation began to discuss with the Grant Family the future of a 17 acre property they owned in Mission Valley. The Family desired to give back to the community and to create a special place where people, especially children, could enjoy the San Diego River. They agreed to donate their property to The San Diego River Park Foundation to advance the vision of a new project which would serve the wishes of the family and the community while helping to advance the vision of the San Diego River Park system.

A committee of representatives from various organizations, the family and the community was formed to advance the vision. In addition, The San Diego River Park Foundation began holding open houses, trailside events and community meetings to solicit input on what the community wanted. Nearly \$100,000 was raised in private donations to develop a preliminary design for the project. A core part of this effort was to advance the San Diego River Trail on the property. With a postal facility adjoining the property on its east, an adaptable design was developed which took advantage of a planned traffic signal to allow for the use of Camino del Rio North to extend the project to the east and to go around important natural areas while at the same time allowing for a future alignment of the River Trail to the property to the east.

An additional \$440,000 in private donations has been raised to advance this project. The San Diego River Park Foundation is working to secure additional funding as needed to complete required permitting. It is anticipated that permitting will take 8–14 months. During this time, The San Diego River Park Foundation will continue fundraising for construction of the overall project. More than \$1 million has been raised for the project’s operating fund to support maintenance of the facility after it is constructed. “

PROJECT FINANCING

<u>Coastal Conservancy</u>	\$156,250
Total Project Costs	\$156,250

The anticipated source of funds for this project is the FY 2008/2009 appropriation to the Conservancy from the Safe Drinking Water, Water Quality and Supply, Flood Control, River and Coastal Protection Bond Act of 2006 (Proposition 84). These funds may be used to protect San Diego Bay and adjacent watersheds, as specified in Section 75060(f). This project is located in the San Diego River Watershed. In addition, these funds may be used to “promote access to and enjoyment of the coastal resources of the state” in accordance with Division 21 of the Public Resources Code (Public Resources Code § 75060(b)). Planning for the construction of approximately one tenth of a mile of the San Diego River Trail will promote access to and along the San Diego River and will continue to realize the goal of creating a San Diego River Parkway from the headwaters to the ocean. As discussed below the project is consistent with Chapter 9 of Division 21.

Consistent with the relevant Budget Act requirements for these funds, this project has been authorized by the SDRC for funding on November 7, 2013 (Exhibit 3). The proposed project is consistent with the SDRC’s enabling legislation, Division 22.9 of the Public Resources Code, Sections 32630-32661, specifically § 32633 (b) which allows funding to provide for the public’s enjoyment and enhance the recreational and educational experience along the River.

CONSISTENCY WITH CONSERVANCY’S ENABLING LEGISLATION:

The proposed project would be undertaken pursuant to Chapter 9 (§31400-31405) of Division 21 of the Public Resources Code. Section 31400 states that the Conservancy shall have a principal role in the implementation of a system of public accessways to and along the state’s coastline. Pursuant to Section 31409, the Conservancy may award grants and provide assistance to public agencies to establish and expand those inland trail systems that may be linked to the California Coastal Trail. The proposed action will help develop public trails that will connect inland communities to the Coastal Trail.

Consistent with Section 31400.2, staff have evaluated the project in light of the total amount of funding available for coastal accessway projects, the fiscal resources of the grantee, the urgency of the project and other factors herein described in recommending this grant. The proposed project cost is reasonable for planning and permitting project of this size, the grantee does not have other

available funds to complete the project, and the project is a high priority for public access in the region.

Pursuant Section 31400.3, the Conservancy is authorized “to provide such assistance as is required to aid public agencies and nonprofit organizations in establishing a system of public coastal accessways, and related functions necessary to meet the objectives of this division.” Consistent with this section, the activities supported through the recommended grant to SDRC are all directly related to the development and operation of a system of public accessways to and along the coast in the San Diego area in order to meet the objectives of Division 21.

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

Consistent with **Goal 1, Objective E**, the proposed project would fund the design of approximately two tenths of a mile of a river parkway trail to connect inland populations to the coast and expand recreational opportunities.

CONSISTENCY WITH CONSERVANCY’S PROJECT SELECTION CRITERIA & GUIDELINES:

The proposed project is consistent with the Conservancy’s Project Selection Criteria and Guidelines, last updated on November 10, 2011, 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. **Support of the public:** This project has broad community support. It is included on the [San Diego River Coalition Work Plan](#), which required unanimous support from over 70 organizations. State Senator Christine Kehoe and the County of San Diego are also strong supporters of efforts to implement the San Diego River Trail. (See Project Support Letters, Exhibit 3).
3. **Location:** The project is not located in the coastal zone but will benefit coastal resources by providing for public access from inland communities to the ocean.
4. **Need:** Not receiving funds for this project from the Conservancy could result in a significant delay in the implementation of this project, slowing important improvements to the regional bike and trail network and in achieving the San Diego River Conservancy’s goals for improving access to the river.
5. **Greater-than-local interest:** The vision for the San Diego River Park is a river-long system of trails, parks, and open spaces, connected by the San Diego River. The Discovery Center will be the centerpiece of the River Park, situated in the most urban part of the watershed. The project will connect inland areas around the San Diego River to public transit and to the heavily-used beaches near the mouth of the River.

6. **Sea level rise vulnerability:** The project is not located close to a shoreline and is not vulnerable to sea level rise. It is located significantly inland and at least 300 feet above sea level at all points.

Additional Criteria

10. **Leverage:** See the “Project Financing” section above.
13. **Readiness:** SDRC is prepared to start the project immediately after receiving funding and can complete the planning project within one year and then proceed to the construction phase with trail groundbreaking anticipated in September 2015.
14. **Realization of prior Conservancy goals:** “See “Project History” above.
16. **Cooperation:** The project is a result of cooperation among State and local governments and community members. The SDRC has worked closely with the San Diego River Park Foundation to initiate the project. The project also has the endorsement of over 70 community groups represented on the San Diego River Coalition.
17. **Vulnerability from climate change impacts other than sea level rise:** The proposed project is in the floodplain of the San Diego River and could be vulnerable to increased flooding related to climate change. This phase of the project will determine the features of this trail segment and the potential climate change impacts, including flood risk management, will be considered in designing the trail and the Discovery Center.
18. **Minimization of greenhouse gas emissions:** The long-term effects of the San Diego River Trail, including the including the Grant Park segment, will encourage non-motorized transportation from the coast to east San Diego County. This will translate into less vehicle trips taken, for work and recreation by San Diegans, thus reducing greenhouse emissions. In addition, the development of the project will offer those who live in that community access to the bike and walking path as an alternative to driving to reach destinations for physical activity. This project is supportive of [SANDAG’s Regional Climate Action Plan](#) (2010), which calls for expanding low-carbon modes of transportation within the region.

CONSISTENCY WITH LOCAL COASTAL PROGRAM POLICIES:

This project is located outside of the coastal zone. However, the project will have a positive impact on the coastal resources located at the terminus of the San Diego River Watershed by providing public access along the River to the coast, and connecting inland communities to the ocean and the Coastal Trail.

COMPLIANCE WITH CEQA:

The proposed project is statutorily exempt from the provisions of CEQA in that the environmental review, design and permitting activities are not yet a project as defined by Public Resources Code § 21065. This section defines a project as an activity "which may cause either a direct physical change in the environment or a reasonably foreseeable indirect physical change in the environment...." No such activities are anticipated in this authorization. In addition, this

project is categorically exempt pursuant to 14 California Code of Regulations § 15262. Consistent with § 15262, the project will only involve preparation of planning documents and will consider environmental factors. Staff will file a Notice of Exemption upon approval of the project.