

COASTAL CONSERVANCY

Staff Recommendation

April 27, 2017

MERCED AVENUE GREENWAY

Project No. 17-001-01

Project Manager: Julia Elkin

RECOMMENDED ACTION: Authorization to disburse up to \$799,813 to the City of South El Monte to prepare plans, designs, environmental analyses, and permit applications for the Merced Avenue Greenway.

LOCATION: Merced Avenue, City of South El Monte, Los Angeles County

PROGRAM CATEGORY: Integrated Coastal and Marine Resources Protection

EXHIBITS

Exhibit 1: [Project Location](#)

Exhibit 2: [Current Site Conditions](#)

Exhibit 3: [Project Letters](#)

RESOLUTION AND FINDINGS:

Staff recommends that the State Coastal Conservancy adopt the following resolution pursuant to Section 31220 of the Public Resources Code:

“The State Coastal Conservancy hereby authorizes disbursement of an amount not to exceed seven hundred ninety nine thousand eight hundred thirteen dollars (\$799,813) to the City of South El Monte to prepare plans, designs, environmental analyses, and permit applications for the Merced Avenue Greenway, subject to the condition that prior to disbursement of any funds, City of South El Monte shall submit for the review and written approval of the Conservancy’s Executive Officer the following:

1. A detailed work program, including budget and schedule; and
2. A signage plan to acknowledge Conservancy funding 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:

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1. The proposed authorization is consistent with Chapter 5.5 of Division 21 of the Public Resources Code, regarding integrated coastal and marine resources protection.
 2. The proposed project is consistent with the current Conservancy Project Selection Criteria and Guidelines.”
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PROJECT SUMMARY:

Staff recommends that the Conservancy authorize the disbursement of up to \$799,813 to the City of South El Monte to prepare plans, designs, environmental analyses, and permit applications for creation of the Merced Avenue Greenway in the City of South El Monte, Los Angeles County. The Merced Avenue Greenway will be created through implementation ready green infrastructure retrofits, native revegetation, and compatible active transportation access opportunities for 1.1 miles of the Merced Avenue street corridor, a heavily industrialized and underutilized 4 lane street in the City. The proposed project consists of the preparation of designs and engineering for the street retrofit, environmental analyses of the project area, applications for all necessary project permits, and community engagement in the planning and design, including public meetings and outreach.

Located above the confluence of the Rio Hondo and San Gabriel Rivers, the City of South El Monte originally developed in the 1930s as an agricultural center. During and after the Second World War, South El Monte underwent heavy industrialization due to its location adjacent to rail lines and new freeways, and the Merced Avenue street corridor’s design today reflects this industrial history of heavy vehicular use. Today, however, the street experiences significantly less traffic volumes and needs have shifted as the former industrial corridor has become a residential neighborhood identified in CalEnviroScreen as a severely disadvantaged community.

Enhancing Merced Avenue through green infrastructure retrofits of the street corridor, active transportation access improvements (such as bike lanes and sidewalks), and increasing permeable surfaces will reduce climate change impacts. These design changes, once implemented, should ameliorate heat island effects, improve water quality, and enhance the overall quality of life for the City’s residents. Creation of an urban greenway along Merced Avenue will also help create a safe connection to the Whittier Narrows Recreation Area (which sits just south of the project site) for residents of both South El Monte and the adjacent community of El Monte to the north. Park space statistics from the LA Countywide Comprehensive Parks and Recreation Needs Assessment Study indicate that the City of South El Monte has only 0.7 park acres per 1,000 people. Only 36% of residents live within a half-mile of a park. Obesity rates are high (35% of children and 30% of adults).

Managing street surface flows and meeting water quality standards are increasingly challenging in developed urban areas. While there are regulations that require certain management practices on new and redeveloped infrastructure, there is little incentive to retrofit the existing infrastructure that covers the majority of the urbanized area. A neighborhood-scale project like Merced Avenue is intended to provide a real-world model of watershed-based design that integrates many on-going efforts in the region to address flood management, water quality and

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habitat restoration. This project will create a model that can be replicated and scaled up both within the City of South El Monte and other parts of Los Angeles County.

As recipient of this grant, the City of South El Monte will be able to complete necessary project design planning in order to undertake City-led construction of the street corridor retrofit. Given its role managing the street network and public infrastructure as well as its role setting street design guidance, the City is eminently qualified and appropriate to act as the recipient of this grant. Additionally, this project creates an innovative and powerful partnership between the City of South El Monte (as the lead entity) and three non-profit groups with expertise in community greening projects: Climate Resolve, the Council for Watershed Health, and Day One. Los Angeles based Climate Resolve will serve as the technical lead on climate-related aspects of the project design considerations while connecting the project to best practices from other regional climate resilience design efforts. Council for Watershed Health, a highly experienced NGO, will lead on technical water resource aspects of the project, including operations and management considerations for proposed green infrastructure elements, pre-and post-construction project monitoring and reporting, and native revegetation approaches. San Gabriel Valley-based Day One will provide the community outreach aspects of this project, which are important to ensuring effective design solutions and support of the local community.

Site Description: The city, located in the County of Los Angeles, is bounded on two sides by the San Gabriel Valley’s two major drainage features – the Rio Hondo River on the west and the San Gabriel River on the east, all within the larger Upper Los Angeles River Watershed. This project focuses on a 1.1-mile stretch of Merced Avenue that lies completely within the City of South El Monte. The current street consists of four through-lanes and generally lacks any vegetation, canopy cover, or permeable surfaces. While the street is designed to accommodate heavy vehicular traffic flows, it is only lightly used, thus creating an appropriate opportunity for redesign.

Project History: This project will be the first time the Conservancy has worked with the City of South El Monte. The project was identified during the Conservancy’s Proposition 1 Round 4 grant round, which was focused exclusively on urban greening projects within Los Angeles County. That grant round followed from an urban greening conference organized by the Conservancy, the Trust for Public Land, the Council for Watershed Health, and the City of Los Angeles, held in January 2016 in South Gate. As that conference acknowledged, local governments play a vitally central role in implementing and scaling up climate change resilient green infrastructure. This project presents precisely such an opportunity to support a local government in planning for implementation of multi-benefit, climate resilient urban green infrastructure improvements.

PROJECT FINANCING

Coastal Conservancy	\$799,813
Others	\$0

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Project Total

\$799,813

The expected source of Conservancy funds for this project is the fiscal year 2016-17 appropriation to the Conservancy pursuant to the Water Quality, Supply, and Infrastructure Improvement Act of 2014 (Proposition 1, Water Code § 79700 et seq.). Funds appropriated to the Conservancy derive from Chapter 6 (commencing with § 79730) and may be used “for multibenefit water quality, water supply, and watershed protection and restoration projects for the watersheds of the state.” (Water Code § 79731.) Section 79732 identifies specific purposes of Chapter 6, which include: protecting and restoring urban watershed health to improve stormwater resource management; implementing watershed adaptation projects in order to reduce the impacts of climate change on California’s communities and ecosystems; and reducing pollution or contamination of rivers or coastal waters and protecting or restoring natural system functions that contribute to water supply, water quality, or flood management. (Water Code § 79732(a), subsections (2), (9), and (11).) The proposed project is an appropriate use of Proposition 1 funds because it has multiple benefits and will restore part of an urban watershed. The benefits of the project are: improved management of street stormwater flows, improved water quality draining from Merced Avenue, increased vegetative cover along the street corridor, restored habitat for wildlife, decreased risk of street flooding, improved active transportation access for the public, and education of and engagement with the local community who utilize the street corridor. The urban watershed in which this project is located is the Los Angeles River watershed.

The proposed project was selected through a competitive grant process under the Conservancy’s *Proposition 1 Grant Program Guidelines* adopted in June 2015 (“Prop 1 Guidelines”). (See § 79706(a)). The proposed project meets each of the evaluation criteria in the Prop 1 Guidelines as described in further detail in this Project Financing section and in the “Project Summary” and “Consistency with Conservancy’s Project Selection Criteria & Guidelines” sections of this staff recommendation.

CONSISTENCY WITH CONSERVANCY’S ENABLING LEGISLATION:

The proposed project will be undertaken pursuant to Chapter 5.5, Integrated Coastal and Marine Resources Protection (Public Resources Code §31220), of the Conservancy's enabling legislation. Section 31220(a) authorizes the Conservancy to award grants for coastal watershed projects that meet one or more criteria of Section 31220(b).

Consistent with Section 31220(b)(1), the proposed project will help reduce contamination of waters within the coastal zone. The project will help achieve this objective by planning for construction of street corridor improvements to improve water quality draining into the LA River.

Consistent with Section 31220(b)(8), the proposed project will help provide for public access compatible with resource protection and restoration objectives. The project will help achieve this objective by planning for construction of street corridor improvements that will increase active

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transportation access in the street corridor while improving health of natural resources and restoring native vegetation.

Consistent with Section 31220(a), staff has consulted with the State Water Resources Control Board in the development of the project to ensure consistency with Public Resources Code Section 30915 et seq. concerning protection and restoration of water quality of coastal waters. In addition, the project is consistent with a local watershed management plan as required by Section 31220(c). This is discussed in detail below under "Consistency with Local Watershed Management Plan/State Water Quality Control Plan."

Consistent with Section 31220(c), the project will include a monitoring and evaluation component by monitoring water quality in the project area.

Section 31111 authorizes the Conservancy to fund plans and feasibility studies. Consistent with this section, this project would support planning and design for the Merced Avenue Greenway.

CONSISTENCY WITH CONSERVANCY'S 2013 STRATEGIC PLAN GOAL(S) & OBJECTIVE(S), AS REVISED JUNE 25, 2015:

Consistent with **Goal 5, Objective F**, the proposed project will complete design plans that improve water quality to the benefit of downstream coastal and ocean resources.

Consistent with **Goal 7, Objective C**, the proposed project will develop plans for urban greening street improvements needed to adapt to the impacts of climate change.

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 October 2, 2014, 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. **Promotion and implementation of state plans and policies:**

CA Climate Adaptation Strategy/Safeguarding California: Reducing Climate Risk Plan

This planning project addresses four priorities articulated by this Plan: 1) increasing water use efficiency; 2) protecting and restoring water resources for important ecosystems; 3) low allergen or non-allergenic urban greening; and 4) preparing California for flooding.

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4. **Support of the public:** Public support is an important part of this project, as City of South El Monte's residents desire improved active transportation access in their community. As part of the project, NGO Day One will actively direct public support into community engagement on project planning elements.
5. **Location:** This project focuses on a 1.1-mile stretch of Merced Avenue that lies within the City of South El Monte, which sits outside the coastal zone but within the LA River watershed.
6. **Need:** If the City cannot procure planning and design funds from the Conservancy, it will likely have to forfeit \$484,000 in construction funding from LA Metro that would be leveraged against any Prop 1 funding.
7. **Greater-than-local interest:** The project will provide a gateway connection to Whittier Narrows Recreation Area, a 1,492-acre park located in the City of South El Monte. It is one of Los Angeles County's largest and most popular recreation areas, serving as a major flood control facility as well as wildlife habitat and open space. The project is also a component of the San Gabriel Valley Bike Master Plan, a comprehensive planning document that guides the development of bicycle infrastructure projects, programs and policies. This project will also serve as a pilot effort at developing design standards for future urban street retrofits in LA County to include climate change resilient stormwater management BMPs and urban greening elements.
8. **Sea level rise vulnerability:** The project site is not vulnerable to sea level rise.

Additional Criteria

9. **Urgency:** Planning and design funding is needed at this time to ensure the City of South El Monte is able to make use of \$484,000 in construction funding from LA Metro that will otherwise expire in June 2018.
10. **Resolution of more than one issue:** This urban green infrastructure project addresses access issues and public safety by improving safe active transportation opportunities in South El Monte and increasing urban vegetative cover to reduce urban heat island effects while also addressing stormwater runoff issues.
11. **Leverage:** See the "Project Financing" section above.
13. **Innovation:** This project will demonstrate design (and subsequent implementation) of green street technical approaches that may then be scaled up in implementation by the City of South El Monte and by the larger metro region.
14. **Readiness:** The City of South El Monte and their local non-profit project partners (Council for Watershed Health, Day One, and Climate Resolve) all are ready to begin work on the project, with staff and technical capacity in place for timely completion of the project.
15. **Realization of prior Conservancy goals:** See "Project History" above.
16. **Return to Conservancy:** See the "Project Financing" section above.

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17. **Cooperation:** This project creates an innovative partnership between the City of South El Monte (as the lead entity) and three non-profit groups with expertise in community greening projects: Climate Resolve, the Council for Watershed Health, and Day One.
18. **Vulnerability from climate change impacts other than sea level rise:** This project is not vulnerable to climate change impacts and functions instead to reduce the magnitude of climate change impacts in the project's urban setting by reducing urban heat island effects with plans for increasing vegetative cover at the project site.
19. **Minimization of greenhouse gas emissions:** This planning project will not result in any significant greenhouse gases (GHG) emissions since it involves only planning activities. Future construction activities that may result from this design will have measurable GHG emissions impacts and those will need to be measured, however, several project elements that will be designed under this grant are intended reduce GHG emissions upon future construction of the project. These include increasing tree canopy coverage through green planting designs and increased bicycle and pedestrian use of the project site through redesigns of the street corridor.

CONSISTENCY WITH LOCAL COASTAL PROGRAM POLICIES:

City of South El Monte, and thus the project site, is located outside of the Coastal Zone, so there is no Local Coastal Program affecting the project area. However, this project will improve water quality in the Upper Los Angeles River Watershed to the benefit of downstream coastal resources, consistent with those LCPs in place in LA County.

CONSISTENCY WITH LOCAL WATERSHED MANAGEMENT PLAN/ STATE WATER QUALITY CONTROL PLAN:

The proposed project is consistent with the Upper Los Angeles River Watershed Enhanced Watershed Management Program (ULAR EWMP), of which the City of South El Monte is a participating member. The ULAR EWMP provides a detailed implementation strategy for water quality improvement inclusive of environmental, aesthetic, recreational, water supply and/or other community enhancements. Specifically, the ULAR EWMP calls for development and implementation of green streets. This multi-benefit green street project is thus consistent with the ULAR EWMP's guidance.

COMPLIANCE WITH CEQA:

The proposed project is statutorily exempt from the provisions of CEQA pursuant to 14 California Code of Regulations Section 15262, since it involves only feasibility or planning studies for possible future actions which have not yet been approved, adopted, or funded. As also required by Section 15262, the proposed project is intended provide information needed to consider and assess environmental factors associated with the project.

Staff will file a Notice of Exemption upon approval of the proposed project.