

COASTAL CONSERVANCY

Staff Recommendation  
May 24, 2018

**SANTA ANA RIVER PARKWAY AND OPEN SPACE PLAN**

Project No. 16-017-01  
Project Manager: Greg Gauthier

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**RECOMMENDED ACTION:** Approval of the Santa Ana River Parkway and Open Space Plan pursuant to Public Resources Code Section 31174(b).

**LOCATION:** Santa Ana River Region, Counties of Orange, Riverside, and San Bernardino

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**EXHIBITS**

- Exhibit 1: [Santa Ana River Parkway and Open Space Plan](#)
  - Exhibit 2: [Project Location Map](#)
  - Exhibit 3: [Project Letters](#)
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**RESOLUTION AND FINDINGS:**

Staff recommends that the State Coastal Conservancy adopt the following resolution pursuant to Division 21, Chapter 4.6) of the Public Resources Code:

“The State Coastal Conservancy (Conservancy) hereby approves the Santa Ana River Parkway and Open Space Plan (the “Plan”), attached to the accompanying staff recommendation as Exhibit 1, which is a vision document that describes goals and objectives for the Santa Ana River region, and identifies potential priority projects for the Santa Ana River Conservancy Program (Chapter 4.6 of Division 21 of the Public Resources Code); provided, that this approval does not commit the Conservancy to adopt any guidelines recommended in the Plan, does not commit the Conservancy to grant funds for or implement any project identified in the Plan, and does not bind the Conservancy in its future decisions to grant funds for, or implement, any 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 action is consistent with Chapter 4.6 of Division 21 of the Public Resources Code, regarding the Santa Ana River Conservancy Program.
  2. The Plan fulfills the requirements of Section 31174(b) of the Public Resources Code.”
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**PROJECT SUMMARY:**

The Santa Ana River is a treasured resource. Flowing nearly 100 miles from its northernmost reaches at the crest of the San Bernardino Mountains out to the coast at Huntington Beach, the river runs through wildlands, agriculture, parks, towns, and cities, touching the lives of millions of Californians.

The largest watershed in Southern California, it contains some of the most rapidly growing areas of the entire state, as well as some of the most pristine riverine reaches remaining in Southern California. Stewardship of the Santa Ana River and its adjacent resources is critical to ensuring the continued vibrancy and resiliency of this region into the 21st century and beyond.

Over the last few decades, public and private agencies, nongovernmental organizations, and community members have worked energetically to develop visions for the river corridor as a natural and recreational resource. Collaborative efforts have generally focused on the development of the Santa Ana River Trail (the Trail), and have spurred momentum for regional visioning and coordination for the broader corridor.

In 2014, the California State Legislature enacted SB 1390, codified as Chapter 4.6 of Division 21 of the Public Resources Code (PRC), Sections 31170-31179, which created the Santa Ana River Conservancy Program ((SARCON) within the State Coastal Conservancy. Under Section 31173 of the legislation, SARCON is required to address the following resource and recreational goals within the Santa Ana River region:

- Recreational opportunities;
- Open space and trails;
- Wildlife habitat and species restoration, enhancement, and protection;
- Wetland restoration and protection;
- Agricultural land restoration and protection;
- Protection and maintenance of the quality of the waters in the Santa Ana River for all beneficial uses;
- Natural floodwater conveyance; and
- Public access to, enjoyment of, and enhancement of recreational and educational experiences in a manner consistent with the protection of land and natural resources and economic resources in the area.

In addition, under PRC Section 31174, SARCON was charged with (1) creating an advisory group and (2) preparing a Santa Ana River Parkway & Open Space Plan (the “Plan”) to advise the future development and management of the Santa Ana River Parkway (“Parkway”), which encompasses the Santa Ana River region defined as the lands within 0.5-mile of the main stem of the Santa Ana River and its tributaries (PRC Section 31172(c).

Under PRC Section 31174(b), the Plan is required to do all of the following:

1. Determine the policies and priorities for conserving the Santa Ana River and its watershed.
2. Identify underused, existing public open spaces and recommend ways to provide better public use and enjoyment in those areas.
3. Identify and prioritize additional low-impact recreational and open-space needs, including additional or upgraded facilities and parks that may be necessary or desirable.

To achieve those objectives, the Plan was developed as a framework to facilitate collaborative efforts when planning for development of the Parkway. The three key functions of the Plan are to:

- Define a shared vision for the Parkway as a state, regional, and local asset.
- Create a depository for a list of ideas for potential and existing Parkway projects.
- Identify tools for prioritizing, evaluating, developing, and implementing projects through proactive collaboration.

As such, the Plan functions as a resource for individual agencies and organizations, as well as a document that provides a framework for SARCON and interested government agencies for collaborating and coordinating efforts in the Parkway.

In the light of the functions of the Plan, approving the Plan will not commit the Conservancy to fund or implement the projects identified in the Plan. Nor will approving the Plan preclude the Conservancy from funding or engaging in any other activities for the Santa Ana River region, including funding or undertaking projects not identified in the Plan, or undertaking efforts to secure funding for Conservancy projects from any source.

The Plan planning process was initiated in July, 2016 and was led by Conservancy staff for SARCON. To ensure an inclusive and informed planning process, staff convened a Technical Advisory Committee (TAC) to assist and provide input throughout the planning process. In addition, the previously established Santa Ana River Policy Advisory Group (PAG), originally created in 2006 in accordance with the Memorandum of Understanding for Coordinated Parkway Planning among Counties along the Santa Ana River Corridor, provided input on the draft Plan.

The PAG was established for the purposes of discussing and monitoring progress of the Parkway, and coordinated each government agency's decision-making across jurisdictional boundaries to ensure expeditious completion of the Parkway. The PAG includes members from both the public and private sectors, has effectively improved coordination across jurisdictional boundaries, and is firmly rooted in local input and control. The PAG consists of the following representatives:

- Three elected supervisors, one from each of the three counties (Orange, Riverside, San Bernardino);

- Elected city representatives from each of the three counties, appointed by the Supervisor of that county;
- One representative from the Santa Ana Watershed Project Authority, a Special District comprised of water districts and utility agencies, whose mission is to plan and build facilities to protect the water quality of the Santa Ana River Watershed; and
- One representative from the Wildlands Conservancy, a private non-profit organization with the dual mission of resource conservation and education.

The formation of the TAC was a key step in the planning process. TAC members were selected from cities, county agencies, federal agencies, and non-profit organizations operating within the Parkway. The TAC has 30 members and met three (3) times during the course of the Plan's development (see Exhibit 1: Santa Ana River Parkway and Open Space Plan, Chapter 1).

Members of the public contributed to the Parkway's vision, as well as to the project idea inventory and development of potential prioritization tools at two public workshops, a river bike festival, and via two online activities.

Public workshops were held in each county in June 2017. The Riverside County workshop was held concurrently with the Trail Bike Ride and Festival at Ryan Bonaminio Park on June 11, 2017. The Orange County workshop was held at the Regional Transportation Center in Santa Ana on June 28, and the San Bernardino County workshop was conducted on June 27, 2017 at the City of Redlands Contemporary Club.

Two separate online activities provided an opportunity for public input. The first activity was available from December 1, 2016 through January 31, 2017. The activity solicited feedback on the draft vision and guiding principles and asked participants to share locations along the Parkway that already embody the vision. The second online activity was available to the public from June 10 to July 11, 2017 and asked participants to prioritize the types of facilities they would like to see in the Parkway and map opportunities for these facilities. Both activities were advertised by distribution to all members of the TAC for inclusion on their agency's websites and social media platforms. TAC members were also provided sample language and social media posts that could be used to increase their reach to the public. The Coastal Conservancy's website and social media platforms also advertised the online activity. The second activity was additionally advertised through the use of fliers distributed at the Trail Bike Ride and Festival on June 11, 2017.

The first three chapters of the Plan provide an overview of the Parkway and establish a comprehensive vision, guiding principles, and goals for realizing this vision. Chapters 4 through 6 identify potential on-the-ground opportunities and ideas for enhancing the Parkway. One series of projects the Plan highlights for Parkway development is the completion of the Trail, the river trail itself. These Trail projects are each undergoing relevant government evaluation processes, including environmental review. The Plan also describes tools to assess the prioritization of other potential project opportunities. Chapters 7 through 9 provide recommended planning and design principles and guidelines as well as suggested implementation strategies that SARCON and collaborating organizations may consult.

Conservancy staff participated in all stages of development of the Plan, providing leadership, draft preparation and review, and input throughout. Because of its direct and intimate involvement in the preparation of the Plan, Conservancy staff believes that it fully meets all of the requirements for the Plan under Chapter 4.6. On that basis, staff recommends that the Conservancy approve the Plan.

**Site Description:** The “Santa Ana River region”, otherwise known as the Parkway, is defined in Public Resources Code § 31172(c) to mean lands within one-half mile of the riverbed of the Santa Ana River or any of its tributaries, from its headwaters near the San Gorgonio Wilderness Area to the Pacific Ocean at the mouth of the Santa Ana River in Huntington Beach; and adjacent watersheds and lands (see Exhibit 2: Project Location Map).

The Parkway will connect the Inland Empire from the crest of the San Bernardino Mountains to the Pacific Ocean at Huntington Beach. The parkway concept is that of a linear park that is centered by Class I bikeway (paved) and hiking and riding (soft-surface) trails, and includes a series of parks connected by the trails. The Plan suggests contemplating a “dual track” of paved and soft-surface trails approximately 88 miles from the coast to the San Bernardino Mountains, and then an additional 12 miles of soft-surface trails within the San Bernardino Mountains. If completed, the Trail would consist of an approximately 100-mile continuous multi-use trail system that connects three counties, Orange, Riverside, and San Bernardino, and multiple cities.

The Santa Ana River watershed drains approximately 3,200 square miles, and includes portions of San Bernardino, Riverside and Orange counties. According to 2016 census data, the population of Riverside County, San Bernardino County and Orange County combined is 7.7 million. Currently, the state’s total population is estimated to be 39.3 million; thus, almost 20 percent of the state’s population lives 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 Bell’s vireo, the Santa Ana Sucker, San Bernardino kangaroo rat, and the Santa Ana River woollystar.

The upper portion of the watershed is in the San Bernardino National Forest, the middle section crosses the Inland Empire, through the urbanized 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 flows into the Prado Basin. The Prado Basin is a flood control basin, 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 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

that 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.

The Trail is nearly complete in Orange County, and almost half finished in Riverside County, with approximately 12 miles left to complete. There are approximately 8 miles of trail to finish in San Bernardino County.

The Parkway is envisioned to traverse the entire length of the Santa Ana River mainstem for one half mile on either side of the river.

**Project History:** Since its creation, the Conservancy has supported access and enhancement projects in the Santa Ana River watershed, particularly within the coastal watersheds of Orange County. The Conservancy began actively working on development of the Trail and the Parkway since passage of the *Safe Drinking Water, Water Quality and Supply, Flood Control, River and Coastal Protection Bond Act of 2006* (Proposition 84), which made \$45,000,000 available to the Conservancy for projects developed in consultation with local government agencies to expand and improve the Parkway.

Legislation (SB 1390) to create the Santa Ana River Conservancy Program, to be administered by the Coastal Conservancy, was signed into law by the Governor in September 2014.

For more than 50 years, trail users and community leaders sought to complete 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 Trail is envisioned to 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 Riverside County up to San Bernardino National Forest wilderness areas. The completed trail will connect 3 counties and 17 cities.

If completed, the Trail 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.

The Parkway and the 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.

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.

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 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 Santa Ana River Trail and Parkway Partnership (“Partnership”) including the Counties of Orange, Riverside, San Bernardino, the Santa Ana Watershed Project Authority and The Wildlands Conservancy.

One of the primary hurdles to completing the Parkway had been a lack of consistent funding for trail projects. The Conservancy approved a \$1,850,000 planning grant to Riverside 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. Finally, Proposition 84 included a \$45 million allocation to the Coastal Conservancy for projects to “expand and improve” the Parkway.

#### **CONSISTENCY WITH CONSERVANCY’S ENABLING LEGISLATION:**

The proposed action directly complies with Public Resources Code Division 21, Chapter 4.6, Section 31174(b) of the Conservancy’s enabling legislation, which calls on the Conservancy to prepare a Santa Ana River Parkway and Open Space Plan for the Santa Ana River Conservancy Program.

Section 31174(b) states that the Conservancy shall:

**“Prepare a Santa Ana River Parkway and Open Space Plan** that shall, at minimum, do all of the following:

1. Determine the policies and priorities for conserving the Santa Ana River and its watershed.
2. Identify underused, existing public open spaces and recommend ways to provide better public use and enjoyment in those areas.
3. Identify and prioritize additional low-impact recreational and open-space needs, including additional or upgraded facilities and parks that may be necessary or desirable.”

The Plan provides the overarching vision, guiding principles, and goals for establishing the policies and priorities for conserving the Santa Ana River. These guiding principles and goals were developed collaboratively through input from the PAG, the TAC and the public. The goals concentrate on four subject areas: water; habitat and wildlife; education, recreation and access; and implementation (see Exhibit 1: Santa Ana River Parkway and Open Space Plan, Chapter 2).

The Plan further identifies underused existing public open spaces and potential improvements, as well as additional low-impact recreational and open-space needs and facilities.

These potential priority project sites were identified through PAG, TAC and public meetings, on-line web portal submissions, and consolidation of information contained in numerous existing plans from throughout the Santa Ana River watershed, including:

- One Water One Watershed Integrated Regional Water Management Plan for the Santa Ana River Watershed (OWOW) Adopted in 2014
- U.S. Forest Service Land Management Plan: Part 1 Southern California National Forests Vision, and the Land Management Plan: Part 2 San Bernardino National Forest Strategy.
- The Western Riverside County Multiple Species Habitat Conservation Plan
- The Upper Santa Ana River Wash Land Management and Habitat Conservation Plan
- The Upper Santa Ana River Habitat Conservation Plan
- County General Plans and Area Plans
- Blue Ribbon Committee Santa Ana River Plans (developed by cities along the Santa Ana River).

(See Exhibit 1: Santa Ana River Parkway and Open Space Plan, Chapter 3, and Project Summary above for more information.)

The Santa Ana River Parkway and Open Space Plan, as part of the Santa Ana River Conservancy Program, addresses the resource and recreational goals of the Santa Ana River region including open space, trails, wildlife habitat, agricultural land protection, water quality protection, educational use, and public access.

Although Chapter 4.6 requires that the Conservancy prepare the Plan, it does not require the Conservancy to adopt the Plan as a binding standard for all future Conservancy actions. Accordingly, when making funding decisions for future Parkway projects, the Conservancy will consider the merits of a specific project, its consistency with Chapter 4.6 of Division 21 of the Public Resources Code, environmental review as required by the California Environmental Quality Act, consistency with proposed funding sources, and any other factors the Conservancy deems relevant.

#### **COMPLIANCE WITH CEQA:**

The Conservancy finds that the Plan is not a “project” as defined by the California Environmental Quality Act (CEQA) Guidelines, 14 Cal. Code of Regulations (“CCR”) Section 15378. Accordingly, pursuant to CCR Section 15060, the Plan is not an activity subject to CEQA review.

CCR Section 15378 defines a “project” as the whole of an action, which has a potential for resulting in either a direct physical change in the environment, or a reasonably foreseeable indirect physical change in the environment, and that is any of the following: (1) an activity directly undertaken by any public agency; (2) an activity undertaken by a person supported by a public agency; or (3) an activity involving the issuance to a person of a permit or other entitlement for use by one or more public agencies.

The Plan provides a framework for furthering the existing collaborative efforts between government agencies to-date within the Parkway. It describes a shared vision for the Parkway, and functions as a resource that contains potential tools that a wide range of government agencies may choose to consult. The Plan also serves an organizational function by creating a depository of ideas for potential projects and existing projects.

The Plan’s policies and guidelines are only recommendations, not binding requirements; the Conservancy retains its discretion in deciding whether to fund any specific project that other entities may propose. Accordingly, approving the Plan does not establish any new policy for the Conservancy. Even if the Plan prioritizes certain projects, the Conservancy has no control over which projects are ultimately brought to the Conservancy for evaluation and approval for funding. Furthermore, any projects related to the Parkway that may have an environmental impact must undergo the Conservancy’s existing evaluation and approval processes, including environmental review under CEQA and assessment of consistency with the Conservancy’s legislation, funding source and selection criteria. The Plan is subservient to the Conservancy’s existing processes and policies, and does not provide an essential step in the review or implementation of any project undertaken in the Parkway. Approving the Plan does not preclude the Conservancy from funding or engaging in any other activities for the Parkway, including funding or undertaking projects not identified in the Plan, or undertaking efforts to secure funding for Conservancy projects from any source.

As a result, the Conservancy’s approval of the Plan does not have a reasonably foreseeable direct or indirect impact on the environment, is not a “project” as defined by CEQA Guidelines, and is not an activity subject to CEQA review.