

COASTAL CONSERVANCY

Staff Recommendation
February 2, 2023

Santiago Park Trail and Habitat Restoration Plan

Project No. 19-020-02
Project Manager: Danh Lai

RECOMMENDED ACTION: Authorization to disburse up to four hundred thousand dollars (\$400,000) to the City of Santa Ana to prepare designs and perform environmental review for restoration of 4.28 acres of pedestrian hiking trail and riparian habitat in Santiago Park within the City of Santa Ana, Orange County.

LOCATION: Santiago Park, City of Santa Ana, Orange County

EXHIBITS

- Exhibit 1: [Project Location Map](#)
Exhibit 2: [Project Conceptual Map](#)
Exhibit 3: [Project Letters](#)
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RESOLUTION AND FINDINGS

Staff recommends that the State Coastal Conservancy adopt the following resolution and findings.

Resolution:

The State Coastal Conservancy hereby authorizes a grant of an amount not to exceed four hundred thousand dollars (\$400,000) to the City of Santa Ana (“the grantee”) to prepare designs and environmental review for restoration of 4.28 acres of pedestrian hiking trail and riparian habitat in Santiago Park within the City of Santa Ana, Orange County.

Prior to commencement of the project, the grantee shall submit for the review and written approval of the Executive Officer of the Conservancy (Executive Officer) the following:

1. A detailed work program, schedule, and budget.
2. Names and qualifications of any contractors to be retained in carrying out the project.

Findings:

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

1. The proposed authorization is consistent with Chapter 4.6 of Division 21 of the Public Resources Code, regarding the Santa Ana River Conservancy Program and funding for recreational opportunities and trails within the Santa Ana River region.
2. The proposed project is consistent with the current Conservancy Project Selection Criteria.

STAFF RECOMMENDATION

PROJECT SUMMARY:

Staff recommends the Conservancy authorize a \$400,000 grant to the City of Santa Ana for the Santiago Park trail and habitat restoration plan. The project will develop design plans and perform environmental review for the restoration of 4.28 acres of pedestrian hiking trails and creek-side habitat in Santiago Park. The environmental review of this planning phase will analyze any potential impact to the land that could result from improvements to the trail. It will ensure that those fall within the conditions of Conditional Exemption Section 15304/Class 4 Minor Alterations. They will ensure implementation of the project will have no impact to the creek and existing vegetation in the area.

The restoration design plan will include separate trails for pedestrians, bicyclists and vehicles to reduce user conflicts and improve safety, improve ADA accessibility to Santiago Park, and provide public information about Santiago Creek and its vegetation and wildlife. A final goal is to support recreational and educational opportunities for disadvantaged youth who visit Santiago Park during field trips.

The design will call for renovating the heavily used pedestrian trail with decomposed granite to enhance accessibility and walkability while establishing a clean visual appearance. High quality security lighting will illuminate the entire trail of the project area in darker hours, creating a stronger sense of safety for pedestrians and cyclists. An ADA accessible bridge will connect the north and south sides of Santiago Park across the creek by improving the functionality of the park and create an inclusive environment for park visitors. The deteriorating landscape will be revitalized with freshly planted native vegetation and maintained with new, comprehensive irrigation systems. Interpretive signage will be installed throughout the project area to enhance the educational spirit of the park. The south end of the park suffers from a lack of amenities and the plan will call for installation of drinking fountains and benches.

Site Description: Santiago Park is a 35-acre park adjacent to Santiago Creek, a tributary to the Santa Ana River, in the City of Santa Ana, Orange County. The project site is located immediately adjacent to the Phase II Santiago Park construction improvements project area, previously funded by the Conservancy. It is a heavily used recreational area and was indicated as the most visited public recreational space in a 2021 city wide survey administered by the City of Santa Ana Parks, Recreation, and Community Services Agency. The southeast section of the

park, where the proposed project is located, is a critical connection point to improve access from the City of Orange and the Santiago Neighborhood into the park site.

The pedestrian trail is visibly worn from high traffic and does not provide quality ADA features. The ambience of the south side of the park suffers from the lack amenities, such as drinking fountains and benches, making it less welcoming and thus underutilized. The current lighting system is insufficient and poses as a safety concern for visitors in the colder seasons when daylight is limited. As for the surrounding native landscape, the vegetation is deteriorating from poor irrigation. The Santiago Park Nature Reserve, viewing areas, walking paths and riparian areas along Santiago Creek provide a feature for the public to enjoy bird watching and other wildlife that live in the park. The park includes large oak trees, eucalyptus trees, sycamore trees, poplar trees, and pine trees.

Grant Applicant Qualifications: The City of Santa Ana Parks, Recreation and Community Services Agency has received and managed more than \$50 million in grant funding to construct new parks and renovate existing parks and recreation facilities. The agency works closely with the City's Public Works Department to ensure that projects are completed in a timely manner and on budget. The City's senior management analyst, administrative services manager, and senior accounting staff monitor project progress and expenditures, and manage project cash flow. Further, the City's competitive contractor selection and bid process ensures that they hire qualified contractors and require performance bonds to ensure that projects are completed on schedule and per plan specifications.

CONSISTENCY WITH CONSERVANCY'S PROJECT SELECTION CRITERIA:

The proposed project is consistent with the Conservancy's Project Selection Criteria, last updated on September 23, 2021, in the following respects:

Selection Criteria

1. Extent to which the project helps the Conservancy accomplishes the objectives in the Strategic Plan.

See the "Consistency with Conservancy's Strategic Plan" section below.

2. Project is a good investment of state resources.

The project provides an opportunity to complete designs for enhancement of an invaluable resource for the state. Once implemented, it will restore and protect the ecological integrity of a portion of this tributary to the Santa Ana River while also providing a safe recreational space. The budget is reasonable for the scope of work. The Park Santiago Neighborhood Association has expressed strong support for the project, deeming it as "an essential respite within the densely populated urban setting in which [they] live". Local residents and visitors will be able to enjoy the interpretive signs that will highlight the critical role that the park plays in sustaining wildlife, even in its urban context.

4. Project benefits will be sustainable or resilient over the project lifespan.

The proposed improvement designs will build on the park’s existing components to encourage longevity for both the ecological and recreational uses. The installation of a pedestrian bridge and decomposed granite trail are durable solutions for the park’s currently deteriorating landscaping and trails. The habitat restoration equips the park with native plants that are resilient to drought and support local ecology. After invasive vegetation is removed, a more robust irrigation system will ensure the success and sustainability of newly planted native plants.

5. Project delivers multiple benefits and significant positive impact.

The project seizes the unique opportunity to provide urban greening along one of very few remaining natural streams in Orange County. Coupled with the plethora of recreation amenities such as archery and lawn bowling, the restoration plans of the trail and enhanced features will provide a safe and welcoming space for all local community members to recreate freely. The project provides access to high quality greenspace for a city with several disadvantaged communities as defined by the California Department of Water Resources.

PROJECT FINANCING

Coastal Conservancy	\$400,000
Project Total	\$400,000

The anticipated source of Conservancy funding for this project is a fiscal year 2021-2022 appropriation to the Conservancy from the General Fund for the Santa Ana River Conservancy Program. (The Budget Act of 2021, Section 19.57 as added by SB 170, Chapter 240, Statutes of 2021) This project is consistent with the goals of the Santa Ana River Conservancy program, as discussed in the Consistency with Conservancy’s Enabling Legislation section below.

The Conservancy does not typically require matching funds or in-kind services, nor does it require documentation of expenditures from other funders or of in-kind services. Typical grant conditions require grantees to provide any funds needed to complete a project.

CONSISTENCY WITH CONSERVANCY’S ENABLING LEGISLATION:

The proposed project is consistent with the provisions of Chapter 4.6 of Division 21 of the Public Resources Code, Sections 31170 to 31174 regarding the Santa Ana River Conservancy Program and funding for recreational opportunities and trails within the Santa Ana River region.

The Santa Ana River region includes lands on either side of the Santa Ana River or its tributaries (Section 31172(c)). The proposed project is located adjacent to Santiago Creek, which is a tributary of the Santa Ana River.

Section 31173 states that the Conservancy may undertake projects and award grants to public agencies to help achieve the goals of the Santa Ana River Conservancy Program, including recreational opportunities and trails, and wildlife habitat and species restoration, and enhancement (Section 31173(a)). Santa Ana River Conservancy Program goals also include public access to, enjoyment of, and enhancement of recreational and educational experience

on program lands in a manner consistent with the protection of land and natural resources and economic resources in the area (Section 31173(b)).

Section 31174(b) requires the Conservancy to prepare the Santa Ana River Parkway and Open Space Plan (Plan), which was approved by the Conservancy in May 2018. The Plan is required to identify and prioritize low-impact recreational and open-space needs, including additional or upgraded facilities and parks that may be necessary or desirable within the Santa Ana River watershed. This project is identified as a priority project in the Plan that will assist in upgrading facilities and parks that are necessary or desirable within the Santa Ana River watershed.

Section 31174(c) states that the Conservancy shall “Give priority to river-related projects that create expanded opportunities for recreation, greening, aesthetic improvement, and wildlife habitat along the corridor of the river and in parts of the river channel that can be improved without infringing on water quality, water supply, and necessary flood control.”

The proposed project will help achieve the goals of the Santa Ana River Conservancy Program by awarding a grant to the City of Santa Ana to complete design for recreational opportunities, trails and wildlife habitat restoration in Santiago Park . The project will plan for expanded opportunities for recreation within the park, and plan for greening, aesthetic improvements, and wildlife habitat along Santiago Creek. The separation of trails for pedestrians and bicyclists and improved security lighting will expand and improve the recreational hiking and biking experience within the park. The installation of interpretive elements also will improve the educational experience and provide context for wildlife viewing and enjoyment.

CONSISTENCY WITH CONSERVANCY’S [2023-2027 STRATEGIC PLAN](#) GOAL(S) & OBJECTIVE(S):

Consistent with Goal 1, Objective 1 of the Conservancy’s 2023-2027 Strategic Plan, the proposed project will benefit disadvantaged communities by planning for park facilities that will support recreational and educational opportunities for local disadvantaged youth.

Consistent with Goal 2, Objective 4, the proposed project will plan improvements to trail accessibility and safety along the Santiago Creek, a tributary to the Santa Ana River and linked to the Santa Ana River Trail and Santa Ana River Park way.

Consistent with Goal 2, Objective 5, the proposed project will plan improvement to interpretive signage and trail amenities such as seating and lighting along the Santiago Creek, a tributary to the Santa Ana River and linked to the Santa Ana River Trail and Santa Ana River Park way.

CEQA COMPLIANCE:

The proposed planning project is statutorily exempt from the California Environmental Quality Act (CEQA) pursuant to Title 14 California Code of Regulations Chapter 3 (CEQA Guidelines), Article 18, Statutory Exemptions, Section 15262, which states that a project involving only feasibility or planning studies for possible future actions that have not yet been approved does not require the preparation of an environmental document under CEQA but does require the consideration of environmental factors. The proposed planning project consists of planning and design, will consider environmental factors, and will be subject to CEQA review and analysis

prior to implementation. No potential improvements will be approved without undergoing environmental review under CEQA.

Upon approval, staff will file a Notice of Exemption for the project.