

COASTAL CONSERVANCY

Staff Recommendation

April 6, 2023

**SANTA ANA RIVER
RIVERSIDE RIVER DISTRICT FEASIBILITY STUDY**

Project No. 23-005-01

Project Manager: Rodrigo Garcia

RECOMMENDED ACTION: Authorization to disburse up to \$200,000 to the City of Riverside to complete a feasibility study to assess the viability of establishing the Riverside River District along the Santa Ana River in the City of Riverside, Riverside County.

LOCATION: Along the Santa River in the City of Riverside, Riverside County

EXHIBITS

Exhibit 1: [Project Location Map](#)

Exhibit 2: [Project Letters](#)

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 two hundred thousand dollars (\$200,000) to the City of Riverside (“the grantee”) to complete a feasibility study to assess the viability of establishing the Riverside River District along the Santa Ana River in the City of Riverside, Riverside 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.
2. The proposed project is consistent with the current Conservancy Project Selection Criteria.

STAFF RECOMMENDATION

PROJECT SUMMARY:

Staff recommends the Conservancy authorize a \$200,000 grant to the City of Riverside (“City”) to complete a feasibility study to assess the viability of establishing the Riverside River District along the Santa Ana River in the City of Riverside, Riverside County (See Exhibit 1). A River District feasibility study will allow the City of Riverside to strategize and plan for commercial and recreational development (including restrooms, parking, concessions, and improvements to existing amenities), operations, and maintenance of the land adjacent to the Santa Ana River within the City and Santa Ana River Parkway.

The proposed project will be informed by previous Conservancy investments including The City of Riverside Urban and Historical Ecology Case Study and The City of Riverside Gateway Parks design project to create a cohesive and sustainable River District. The City will hire a consulting team to lay out a strategy for developing design standards for development, art, interpretation, and wayfinding that will create a strong sense of place of the public space referred to as the “River District”. The strategies laid out in the feasibility study will have a focus on creating access to the river. The feasibility study will also identify a strategy for managing, operating, and maintaining the River District allowing for City and Conservancy investments to be preserved and financially sustainable.

Many Riverside residents do not know how to access the river, do not feel safe near the river, or even know there is a river in the city. Recent community engagement efforts for the Riverside Gateway Parks project called for a sustainable public space that is well maintained, safe, and accessible, especially to underserved communities. In addition, the grantee is working with Native Californian Tribes to provide cultural programming along the river and will continue to consult throughout the preparation of the feasibility study.

Project deliverables include a concept diagram showing the River District footprint, cost estimates for development, maintenance, and operations, and a plan for implementation. The feasibility study will also outline a recommended governance structure for management of the River District, which could include establishing a separate public entity for that purpose, and a branding and marketing strategy. The Riverside River District Feasibility Study’s goal is to create a succinct and actionable plan for the City of Riverside to create an environmentally and fiscally sustainable public space that is safe, walkable, inviting, environmentally resilient, and connects Riverside residents and visitors to the Santa Ana River.

Site Description: The entire 11-mile northern edge of the City of Riverside fronts on the Santa Ana River. In Riverside, the Santa Ana River is a juxtaposition of a natural and scenic riparian corridor running through an urban matrix. Supporting riparian wildlife habitats, recharging the groundwater basins that supply homes and businesses with water, providing recreation and

opportunities to connect to nature, the river is a vital component of life in the City of Riverside. The City of Riverside owns and operates 800 acres of parkland within 1/2 mile of the Santa Ana River.

Grant Applicant Qualifications: The City of Riverside Parks, Recreation, and Community Services Department (PRCSD) has more than 40 years of experience successfully completing similar grant-funded projects. The California Department of Parks and Recreation has been the primary source of grant funding through various programs and funding sources. The PRCSD’s Senior Management Analyst and Accounting Technician are dedicated to the financial operations of the department, including grant management, invoicing, and reimbursement requests. A dedicated Grants Program Manager will advise and participate in the oversight of the grant. In addition, three Landscape Architects and one Architect serve in the PRCSD’s Planning and Design division. This team will coordinate and carry out this project.

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 accomplish 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 proposed project will be informed by previous Conservancy investments including The City of Riverside Urban and Historical Ecology Case Study and The City of Riverside Gateway Parks design project to create a cohesive and sustainable River District.

When implemented in the future, the proposed project will ensure the Santa Ana River continues to serve as a recreational destination and can serve as a model for other jurisdictions along the river interested in developing their own River Districts.

The proposed project is consistent with the following goals of the 2018 *Santa Ana River Parkway and Open Space Plan* prepared by the Conservancy:

- Goal 3 (Education, Recreation, and Access): Provide a range of river-related opportunities for people to be active outdoors.
- Goal 7 (Education, Recreation and Access): Provide safe access to the river in appropriate locations.
- Goal 1 (Implementation): Collaboratively design projects and programs to provide multiple benefits that support the water, wildlife and habitat, and recreation, education and access goals for the Santa Ana River Parkway.

3. Project includes a serious effort to engage tribes.

As part of the Conservancy-funded Riverside Gateway Parks project, the curator at the Sherman Indian Museum and the curator for the Museum of Riverside have expressed interest in helping to design facilities within the project area to host tribal cultural and educational programs in the parks, as an extension of both museums’ outreach efforts. Additionally, the City of Riverside’s tribal contacts have been invited to participate in the planning and design efforts for the Riverside Gateway Parks project. Three Tribes have expressed interest in consulting on the project based on the draft Riverside Gateway Parks Master Plans. The city will continue to include these tribes in the development of the River District.

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

The goal of the proposed project is to create an environmentally and fiscally sustainable River District. The feasibility study will lay out a strategy for branding and placemaking that includes new development practices, materials, and methods to ensure long term resiliency. A cohesive plant palette has already been developed with the Gateway Park project that includes Southern California native and climate adapted species based on the Urban and Historic Ecology Study being conducted by the San Francisco Estuary Institute through a grant from the Conservancy. This plant palette will allow for greater carbon sequestration and low water use, along with habitat value. Furniture and fixtures made recycled materials and/or fossil free products will also be selected for the entire River District.

The feasibility study will also identify a financial governance structure to ensure that the River District is properly maintained, secured, and programed.

5. Project delivers multiple benefits and significant positive impact.

The proposed project, when implemented, will be an opportunity to transform this segment of the Santa Ana River into a regional recreation attraction. As a recreational destination, the River District will increase urban greening, carbon sequestration through tree planting, and provide equitable public access, recreation, and education.

6. Project planned with meaningful community engagement and broad community support.

As part of the Riverside Gateway Parks project, stakeholders and the community have been engaged using virtual community and stakeholder meetings, in-person outreach activities, and online using an interactive map and survey on a website dedicated to the project. Additionally, the grantee attended several standing community and neighborhood meetings, and the City’s 2022 World Rivers Day event to provide project update and receive input.

The City of Riverside mayor has authored a robust Community Engagement Policy that will also be used as a guiding principle for the proposed project.

PROJECT FINANCING

Coastal Conservancy	\$200,000
Project Total	\$200,000

The anticipated source of Conservancy funding for this project is a FY 2021/2022 appropriation to the Conservancy from the General Fund (The Budget Act of 2021, as amended by SB 170, Chapter 240, Statutes of 2021) specifically for the Santa Ana River Conservancy Program. The proposed project is consistent with the goals of the Santa Ana River Conservancy Program as discussed in the Consistency with the Conservancy's Enabling Legislation section below.

CONSISTENCY WITH CONSERVANCY'S ENABLING LEGISLATION:

The proposed project is consistent with Chapter 4.6 of Division 21 of the Public Resources Code, Sections 31170 to 31180 regarding the Santa Ana River Conservancy Program.

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, open space, trails, protection and maintenance of the quality of the waters in the Santa Ana River for all beneficial uses. (Section 31173(a)). The proposed project will complete a feasibility study along a portion of the Santa Ana River for the purposes of public access and recreation.

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

Consistent with **Goal 1, Objective 1**, the proposed project will include engagement with and participation by people from systemically excluded communities.

Consistent with **Goal 2, Objective 5**, the proposed project will plan facilities along the Santa Ana River to enhance recreational opportunities.

CEQA COMPLIANCE:

The proposed project is statutorily exempt from review under the California Environmental Quality Act (CEQA) pursuant to Title 14 California Code of Regulations (CCR) Chapter 3, 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 project consists of the preparation of a feasibility study and will consider environmental factors and will be subject to CEQA review and analysis prior to implementation.

The proposed project is categorically exempt from CEQA pursuant to 14 CCR section 15306, which exempts data collection, research, and resource evaluation activities which do not result in a serious or major disturbance to an environmental resource. The proposed project consists of a feasibility study that will not result in a serious disturbance to any environmental resource.

Upon approval, staff will file a Notice of Exemption.