

COASTAL CONSERVANCY

Staff Recommendation

February 15, 2024

SANTIAGO PARK MAIN STREET CONSTRUCTION

Project No. 19-020-03

Project Manager: Danh Lai

RECOMMENDED ACTION: Authorization to disburse up to \$2,807,000 to the City of Santa Ana to enhance and restore the 2.66 acre Santiago Park Main Street entrance by constructing site amenities such as lighting, Santiago Creek viewing decks, and landscape improvements, and separating the pedestrian walkway and bike trails to allow for safe recreation.

LOCATION: City of Santa Ana, Orange County

EXHIBITS

Exhibit 1: [Project Location Map](#)

Exhibit 2: [Project Photos](#)

Exhibit 3: [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 million eight hundred and seven thousand dollars (\$2,807,000) to the City of Santa Ana (“the grantee”) to enhance and restore the 2.66-acre Santiago Park Main Street entrance by constructing site amenities such as lighting, Santiago Creek viewing decks, landscape improvements, and separating the pedestrian walkway and bike trails to allow for safe recreation.

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.
3. A plan for acknowledgement of Conservancy funding.
4. Evidence that all permits and approvals required to implement the project have been obtained.

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.
2. The proposed project is consistent with the current Conservancy Project Selection Criteria.

STAFF RECOMMENDATION

PROJECT SUMMARY:

Staff recommends the Conservancy authorize a grant of up to \$2,807,000 to restore and enhance the 2.66-acre Santiago Park Main Street entrance by constructing site amenities such as lighting, Santiago Creek viewing decks, landscape improvements, and separating the pedestrian walkway and bike trails to allow for safe recreation. This proposed project will enhance and restore the primary entrance to Santiago Park in the City of Santa Ana (the City) in Orange County. The City has completed design and engineering and is ready to proceed immediately with construction of the project upon approval of funding.

The proposed project will create a safe and inviting entrance to Santiago Park. It will add site amenities including two creek viewing decks, interpretive signage, picnic tables, benches, a drinking fountain, security lighting, drought tolerant landscaping, and a drip irrigation system. The proposed project will also separate the pedestrian walkway and bike trail and connect these to two viewing decks overlooking Santiago Creek with signage to inform visitors about groundwater, wildlife, and drought tolerant and native landscaping. Implementation of these site improvements address park visitor needs by defining separate pathways for different users, providing public site amenities, reintroducing landscaping that has been lost, and enhancing the overall aesthetic and establishing a defined Santiago Park entrance.

The Santiago Park Main Street entrance was once a densely forested, riparian natural area that has drastically declined over the years and is now a remnant asphalt roadway dividing vacant dirt areas. This unmarked roadway is shared by all pedestrians and bicyclists who enter the park, resulting in unsafe conditions. This entrance is often used by children, families and school groups visiting the Discovery Cube Science Center across Main Street, who use the park as a picnic site. The site lacks basic amenities including security lighting, picnic tables, benches, landscaping, and interpretive signage. Much of Santiago Park is programmed with active recreation amenities including sports courts and playgrounds, but this project area will provide visitors with much needed passive recreation opportunities such as picnicking or birdwatching.

Site Description:

Santiago Park is a 35-acre linear park located on the northern edge of the City of Santa Ana along Santiago Creek. The park is one of the oldest in Santa Ana, and is the city's only wilderness park, rendering it a unique and important asset in its extremely urbanized setting. All properties north of Santiago Park to the city limits are slated to be developed as medium density, 6-10 story residential when built out in 2032, per the city's General Plan Land Use Element. The park provides critical open space and natural respite for residents living in dense urban conditions with limited or no access to the outdoors. As the City's second largest park, it serves all Santa Ana residents and is comprised of both passive and active recreational areas along both sides of the creek. Recreational amenities include bike and pedestrian trails providing connections towards the Santa Ana River Trail and City of Orange, a wildlife nature facility and viewing areas, archery range, playgrounds, amphitheater, tennis and pickle ball courts, lawn bowling green, log cabin, outdoor event space, ballfield, and restrooms. The Santiago Park Main Street Entrance Construction project extends from the Main Street entrance to the existing park restroom and playground. The project area is characterized by an asphalt roadway, bare dirt, and is lacking in site amenities, vegetation, and trees. As a park entrance, this landscape is the front door and the first impression that many visitors experience of Santiago Park.

Grant Applicant Qualifications: The City of Santa Ana Public Works Agency is responsible for over \$155 million of Capital Improvement Program projects annually in addition to maintaining and managing 53 parks, 13 miles of off-street trails, a zoo, and municipal stadium. The Park Services Division of the Public Works Agency successfully completes park and trail projects in Santa Ana from planning, design, and construction to maintenance and operation. The city has successfully managed four previous Conservancy grants.

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 project provides an opportunity to implement designs for enhancement of an invaluable resource for the city, region, and state. Once implemented, it will help restore and protect the ecological integrity 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.

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

An important goal of the proposed project is to ensure site improvements are sustained and resilient long into the future. To accomplish this, the design is intentionally minimal, rustic, and suited to the local environment. Drought tolerant and native riparian plants are inherently resilient, require less maintenance, have low irrigation needs, and will ensure the park entrance remains attractive even in potential periods of drought. Re-establishment of vegetation will support local biodiversity and a healthy ecosystem by providing habitat and food for local wildlife including pollinators, birds, and beneficial insects. Additionally, reestablished vegetation will help prevent stormwater runoff by capturing water to infiltrate into the ground aquifer. The selection of materials including natural stone and wood typically have lower environmental impact compared to their synthetic counterparts, which will help reduce the potential carbon footprint of the project. The use of simple materials, along with drought tolerant landscaping will require less maintenance as compared to elaborate or high maintenance designs. This project aims to restore the site to its natural and rustic character, and sustain these improvements into the future.

The project goals align with Santa Ana’s General Plan Conservation Element of 2022 core value of sustainability. Santa Ana prioritizes land use decisions that benefit future generations, plan for the impacts of climate change, and incorporate sustainable design practices at all levels. Implementation Action 2.2 of the General Plan Conservation Element is to “identify opportunities to enhance the natural qualities of Santiago Creek to protect habitat and reintroduce native plants and animals.” The restoration and preservation of the remaining stretches of wilderness habitat at Santiago Park is incredibly important to the City of Santa Ana and its residents.

4. 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 and creates an immersive escape where visitors will forget they are in a city. Coupled with 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	\$2,807,000
Project Total	\$2,807,000

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.

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 et seq. 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 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 identifies and prioritizes 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 meets the criteria for a priority project as detailed in the Plan that will assist in upgrading facilities and parks that are necessary or desirable within the Santa Ana River watershed.

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(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 construction for recreational opportunities, trails, and wildlife habitat restoration in Santiago Park. The project will construct expanded opportunities for recreation within the park, and provide 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 will also improve the educational experience and provide context for wildlife viewing and enjoyment.

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

Consistent with **Goal 1.1 Commit Funding to Benefit Systematically Excluded Communities**, the proposed project will benefit disadvantaged communities by constructing park facilities that will support recreational and educational opportunities for local disadvantaged youth.

Consistent with **Goal 2.4 Build Trails**, the proposed project provides improvements to trail accessibility and safety along Santiago Creek, a tributary to the Santa Ana River and linked to the Santa Ana River Trail and Santa Ana River Parkway.

Consistent with **Goal 2.5 Recreation Facilities and Amenities**, the proposed project will provide 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 Parkway.

CEQA COMPLIANCE:

The proposed project is categorically exempt from review under the California Environmental Quality Act (CEQA) pursuant to the CEQA Guidelines at Title 14 California Code of Regulations, Article 19, Section 15304 (Minor Alterations to Land, Class 4) and Section 15303 (New Construction or Conversion of Small Structures, Class 3). Class 4 consists of minor public alterations in the condition of land, water, and/or vegetation, examples of which include but are not limited to new gardening or landscaping, and creation of bicycle lanes. This project will install new landscaping and establish separate bicycle and pedestrian trails. Class 3 consists of two creek viewing decks, interpretive signage, picnic tables, and benches.

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