

COASTAL CONSERVANCY

Staff Recommendation
April 17, 2026

SANTA ANA RIVER: SANTIAGO PARK TRAIL AND HABITAT IMPROVEMENTS PROJECT

Project No. 19-020-04
Project Manager: Danh Lai

RECOMMENDED ACTION: Authorization to disburse up to \$2,925,000 to the City of Santa Ana to implement the Santiago Park Trail and Habitat Improvements Project. This project will consist of constructing site improvements in a 5-acre area on the eastern end of Santiago Park, including an accessible pedestrian walkway, native landscaping, lighting, and a pedestrian bridge across Santiago Creek in Orange County.

LOCATION: Santa Ana, Orange County

EXHIBITS

- Exhibit 1: [Project Location Map](#)
Exhibit 2: [Project Photos](#)
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 two million nine hundred twenty-five thousand dollars (\$2,925,000) to the City of Santa Ana (“the grantee”) to implement the Santiago Park Trail and Habitat Improvements Project. This project will consist of constructing site improvements in a 5-acre area on the eastern end of Santiago Park, including an accessible pedestrian walkway, native landscaping, lighting, and a pedestrian bridge across Santiago Creek in 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.
3. A plan for acknowledgement of Conservancy funding.
4. Evidence that all permits and approvals required to implement the project have been obtained.

STAFF RECOMMENDATION

PROJECT SUMMARY:

Staff recommends the Conservancy authorize a \$2,925,000 grant to the City of Santa Ana to implement the Santiago Park Trail and Habitat Improvements Project. This project will consist of constructing site improvements in a 5-acre area on the eastern end of Santiago Park, including an accessible pedestrian walkway, native landscaping, lighting, and a pedestrian bridge across Santiago Creek in Orange County.

Santiago Park is a 35-acre park adjacent to Santiago Creek, a tributary to the Santa Ana River. The southeast side of the park suffers from a lack of amenities, such as drinking fountains and benches, making it less welcoming and thus underutilized. The pedestrian trail in this section of the park is visibly worn from high traffic and does not provide quality accessible features. The current lighting system is insufficient and poses 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 and contributing to wildlife habitat loss. The proposed project is part of a long-term effort to restore all 35 acres of Santiago Park. The proposed project site is immediately adjacent to two Santiago Park projects that have been completed with Conservancy funding. These new sections of the park now have a lively and welcoming ambiance that the proposed project section will be modeled on. The new park project site is a critical connection point for improving access to the park from the City of Orange and the Santiago Neighborhood.

The proposed project will provide many new and upgraded park amenities. The existing dirt paths on the park's south side will be upgraded to 9,600 square feet of decomposed granite surfaces, re-establishing a continuous pedestrian trail that improves access from surrounding neighborhoods via Lincoln Avenue, as well as from the park's western parking lot and the City of Orange. Trail access points connecting to the City of Orange's trail system will be revitalized to encourage increased visitation from Santa Ana and neighboring communities. An accessible pedestrian bridge will be installed to provide a safe and inclusive connection between the north and south sides of Santiago Creek, an area that is currently inaccessible. These improvements will allow park visitors to more easily reach key amenities, including the Wildlife Nature Center, Wildlife Viewing Facility, Archery Range, and the park's trail network. The project includes additional enhancements—such as the installation of drinking fountains, interpretive signage, benches, and upgrades to the 27 lighting poles—that will further enrich the park's recreational experience and public safety. Finally, the project includes restoring over 5 acres of drought-tolerant landscape to reflect the region's natural ecosystem and ensure that plants are climate

resilient. A new automated drip irrigation system will support long-term sustainability, preventing deterioration caused by drought conditions.

Site Description: Santiago Park is located in and owned by the City of Santa Ana, Orange County and serves as the city’s only designated wilderness park, providing vital natural open space for an otherwise highly urbanized environment. The park supports existing suburban neighborhoods as well as the medium density residential developments anticipated under the City’s 2032 General Plan Land Use Element. The park is approximately one mile from Downtown Santa Ana and within walking distance of both Main Place Mall and the iconic Discovery Cube Science Center. A 2021 City of Santa Ana survey identified Santiago Park as the most widely used and popular park within the city, demonstrating its importance as a recreational resource to the community. Although the park is not located directly in a disadvantaged community, it is accessible by three major freeways and can be enjoyed by many of the surrounding communities.

Grant Applicant Qualifications: The City of Santa Ana Public Works Agency – Park Services Division has received and managed more than \$50 million in grant funding to construct new parks and renovate existing parks and recreation facilities. This includes several grants from the Conservancy to improve the other segments of Santiago Park. The agency is comprised of technical experts that ensure projects are sustainably, innovative, and completed in a timely manner and within budget. 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. The agency received support from both the Board of Recreation and Parks and City Council to manage the improvement of Santiago Park.

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 enhance 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”. 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 improvements will build on the park’s existing components to encourage longevity for both 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, pickleball, 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.

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

The City of Santa Ana’s Neighborhood Initiatives Team meets quarterly with the Park Santiago Neighborhood Association at the Santiago Park Lawn Bowling Clubhouse where they discuss the improvements for Santiago Park. This space allows the Neighborhood Initiatives Team and Park Santiago Neighborhood Association to collaborate and brainstorm ideas for park improvements. Community residents are invited to sketch and share comments directly onto site plans provided by the City of Santa Ana Public Works Agency – Park Services Division. The feedback is integrated into concept designs and presented to Park Santiago Neighborhood Association for consent and approval.

PROJECT FINANCING

Coastal Conservancy	\$2,925,000
City of Santa Ana Acquisition & Development Fund (Local Residential Development Fees)	\$200,000
Project Total	\$3,125,000

The anticipated source of Conservancy funding for this project is a fiscal year 2020/2021 appropriation to the Conservancy from the Safe Drinking Water, Water Quality and Supply, Flood Control, River and Coastal Protection Bond Act of 2006 (Proposition 84). Chapter 5 of Proposition 84 provides funding for the protection and restoration of rivers, their watersheds, and associated land, water and other natural resources. Chapter 5 specifically allocates funds to the Coastal Conservancy for projects that “expand and improve” the Santa Ana River Parkway and that have been developed “in consultation with local government agencies participating in the development of the Santa Ana River Parkway.” (Public Resources Code section 75050(i)).

Consistent with this section, this project will construct improvements to a park along the Santa Ana River Parkway in consultation and partnership with local government agencies. 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 City of Santa Ana will also receive \$200,000 through a local match from the Acquisition & Development Fund (Residential Development Fees).

Unless specifically identified as "Required Match," the other sources of funding and in-kind contributions described above are estimates. 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)).

Section 31173 authorizes the Conservancy to 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."

Consistent with the above referenced sections, the proposed project is located adjacent to Santiago Creek, which is a tributary of the Santa Ana River, and is thus within the region covered by the Santa Ana River Program. The proposed project will help achieve the goals of the Santa Ana River Conservancy Program by enhancing recreational opportunities and trails and by restoring wildlife habitat 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 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.

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.

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 will provide 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). Class 4 consists of minor public alterations in the condition of land, water, and/or vegetation that will not remove healthy mature trees, examples of which include but are not limited to new gardening or landscaping, and bicycle lanes. Consistent with this section, the proposed project consists of landscaping and installation of park amenities, and no mature trees will be removed.

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