

COASTAL CONSERVANCY

Staff Recommendation

August 5, 2010

**SAN DIEGO RIVER TRIBUTARY CANYONS PROJECT**

File No. 08-059

Project Manager: Jim King

**RECOMMENDED ACTION:** Authorization to expend up to \$220,000 to complete real estate assessments, environmental review, permitting and associated studies required for public access improvements and natural resource enhancements as part of the San Diego River Tributary Canyons Project in the City of San Diego.

**LOCATION:** Mission Valley, City of San Diego, San Diego County

**PROGRAM CATEGORY:** Public Access

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**EXHIBITS**

Exhibit 1: [Project Location and Overview Maps](#)

Exhibit 2: [San Diego River Conservancy Resolution, May 6, 2010](#)

Exhibit 3: San Diego River Tributary Canyons Project Feasibility Report  
(provided to board on separate CD and is available by request)

Exhibit 4: Project Letters (to be hand-delivered to the meeting)

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**RESOLUTION AND FINDINGS:**

Staff recommends that the State Coastal Conservancy adopt the following resolution pursuant to 31400 of the Public Resources Code:

“The State Coastal Conservancy hereby authorizes the expenditure of an amount not to exceed \$220,000 (two hundred twenty thousand dollars) to complete technical studies, including: real estate assessments, environmental review, permitting and associated studies required for implementation of public access improvements and natural resource enhancements in tributary canyons of the lower San Diego River in the City of San Diego.

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:

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1. The proposed project is consistent with the current Project Selection Criteria and Guidelines.
  2. The proposed authorization is consistent with the purposes and objectives of Chapter 9 of Division 21 of the Public Resources Code, regarding public access to the coast.
  3. The San Diego River Conservancy has approved this project for funding.
  4. The proposed project serves greater than local needs.”
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**PROJECT SUMMARY:**

The proposed authorization will provide up to \$220,000 for real estate assessments, environmental review, permitting and associated studies required for public access improvements and natural resource enhancements in two tributary canyons of the lower San Diego River in the City of San Diego (Exhibit 1). The Coastal Conservancy has developed this project in close collaboration with the San Diego River Conservancy. A feasibility study authorized by the two governing boards in 2008 and completed in April 2010 provided conceptual designs and recommended a preferred alignment for a 3.3- mile public trail connecting upland neighborhoods north and south of the San Diego River to a city-planned river park in eastern Mission Valley (Exhibit 3). The San Diego River Conservancy approved the study and its recommended trail alignment at a meeting on May 6, 2010 and authorized staff to request that the Coastal Conservancy undertake the first phase of the project as recommended in the feasibility study.

The San Diego River Tributary Canyons Project is consistent with several local and regional plans. It would provide lateral trail connections linking neighborhoods with the City’s proposed River Park and the proposed 52-mile San Diego River Trail. The trail would intersect with the San Diego River Trail six miles inland from the Coastal Trail, near Qualcomm Stadium in Mission Valley. The project would provide non-vehicular access from adjacent neighborhoods to an urban center and to the Fenton Parkway Station on the San Diego Trolley Green Line. The project will eventually provide a major contribution to the city’s developing pedestrian and bicycle infrastructure.

Nearly three-quarters of the proposed trail exists in rudimentary form today with actual trail length requiring construction limited to 4,567 linear feet. However, much of the existing trail through the canyons is substandard and the majority of the alignment traverses private parcels. There are severe barriers for contiguous pedestrian and bicycle access due to urban development patterns and steep topography. The canyon open space areas lie within the City of San Diego’s Multiple Species Conservation Plan area where all development, including public trails, requires conscientious design and review. The entire project would be developed with sensitivity to these environmental constraints and includes erosion control measures and vegetation management actions to improve on existing conditions.

The feasibility study recommends a series of technical studies to continue development of the project. The next step is a detailed review of real estate interests within the recommended canyon trail corridors and negotiations for the agreements needed for acquiring rights-of way. If the rights-of-way issues can be resolved, additional design, environmental review and the other regulatory compliance work would be completed to develop a project that is ready for

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construction. Staff will also continue to facilitate a future phase of the project to construct a bridge spanning the river creating a pedestrian and bicycle link between the two tributary canyon trails. The proposed bridge is an element requiring coordination with the city's long-term community planning efforts in Mission Valley, including its Public Facilities Financing Plan.

Conservancy staff would initiate work in close association with the Executive Officer of the San Diego River Conservancy. As this planning phase proceeds, Coastal Conservancy and San Diego River Conservancy staff would continue to work closely with the City of San Diego and community interests to identify the best organization for constructing, operating and maintaining the project and to outline the agreements needed to prepare for the work.

**Site Description:** The project area is entirely within the City of San Diego and is located near its geographic center in eastern Mission Valley. The project would create a north-south trail that connects upland neighborhoods to the San Diego River. The proposed trail would cross the river near the Qualcomm Stadium in Mission valley. The project area is comprised of three main segments: the Ruffin/Sandrock Canyon segment connects Serra Mesa with Mission Valley, the Ellison Canyon segment connects Normal Heights to Mission Valley and the Mission Valley segment includes the newly developed River Run and Escala residential districts, the Fenton Marketplace shopping center, and adjoining urban spaces within eastern Mission Valley (Exhibit 1).

Aside from the canyons and a narrow riparian corridor along the river, the project area is urban in character. The San Diego Chargers football stadium and north/south freeways I-15 and I-805 are close by. The selected trail alignment would cross I-8 on an existing overpass and the San Diego Metropolitan Transit System 'Green Line' trolley at or near its Fenton Parkway station.

The narrow ribbon of the San Diego River, the habitats of the mesa rims to the north and south and the tributary canyons themselves are important natural areas within the city providing refuge for wildlife and visual relief and interest for humans. The bifurcated Ruffin/Sandrock Canyon system is the largest tributary canyon open space in the lower river reach measuring approximately two square miles. Some 115 acres are owned and managed by the City's Recreation and Parks Department, Open Space Division and 66 acres are owned by San Diego Gas and Electric Company. Ellison Canyon located to the south, across Interstate 8, is one of a series of small canyons and ravines that constitute the Normal Heights rim. It is characterized by steep chaparral-covered slopes occurring primarily on a patchwork of 23 small residential parcels that extend to the canyon bottom from a frontage on Mountain View Drive. Both canyon areas contain important remnant habitats protected under San Diego's Multiple Species Conservation Plan regulatory framework.

**Project History:** In the summer of 2007 the Coastal Conservancy and San Diego River Conservancy began interacting with City of San Diego representatives and community interests to outline a project involving San Diego River tributary canyons. The focus stemmed partly from a vigorous local movement galvanized by the Sierra Club's San Diego Canyons Campaign. A subsequent 2008 SDRC staff report recommended conducting a feasibility study to look at a project linking the city's planned San Diego River Park and San Diego River Trail to nearby upland neighborhoods now accessible only by automobile. In May and June 2008, the San Diego

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River Conservancy and the Coastal Conservancy approved use of \$150,000 of Proposition 84 bond funds for a feasibility study to define a suitable capital project.

The San Diego River Tributary Canyons Project Feasibility Report was completed in April 2010 outlining a project that when implemented would provide a 3.3 mile public trail connecting Serra Mesa and Normal Heights with the San Diego River. The project would implement numerous public policy initiatives including key elements of the City’s recently updated General Plan which emphasizes non-vehicular public access as a central feature in community development. On May 6, 2010 the San Diego River Conservancy endorsed the feasibility report, including its recommended trail alignment and approved the next phase of project development (Exhibit 2 – SDRC Resolution, Exhibit 3 – Feasibility Study).

**PROJECT FINANCING:**

Coastal Conservancy	\$220,000
SDRC (est. in-kind)	<u>25,000</u>
<b>Total Project Cost</b>	<b>\$245,000</b>

Staff proposes to use funds appropriated to the Conservancy in fiscal year 2008-09 from the Safe Drinking Water, Water Quality and Supply, Flood Control, River and Coastal Protection Bond Act of 2006 (Proposition 84) for projects approved by the San Diego River Conservancy. This funding source may be used for protection of San Diego Bay and adjacent watersheds. Proposition 84 provides for using funds for expenditures pursuant to Division 21 of the Public Resources Code, as specified in Section 75060(b). Pursuant to Section 75060(b), funds may be allocated to the improvement of accessways in a manner that is compliant with Division 21 of the Public Resources Code. This project shall apply such funds to the design of accessways in accord with Division 21.

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

The proposed project would be undertaken pursuant to Chapter 9 (Sections 31400-31405) of the Conservancy’s enabling legislation, Division 21 of the Public Resources Code. Section 31400 states that the Conservancy shall have a principal role in the implementation of a system of public accessways to and along the state’s coastline. The proposed action will enable the development of public trails that will connect to the San Diego River Trail which is under development and will ultimately link up with the California Coastal Trail at Ocean Beach. Section 31409 authorizes the Conservancy to provide assistance to other public agencies to establish and expand those inland trail systems that may be linked to the California Coastal Trail.

Consistent with Section 31400.2, staff has evaluated the amount of funding proposed to be provided for this project in light of the total amount available for coastal public accessways and urban waterfront projects, the urgency of the project relative to other eligible projects, and the application of factors prescribed by the Conservancy for the purpose of determining project eligibility and priority (see discussion below). To the extent appropriate, staff will incorporate the guidelines of the Conservancy’s ‘Standards and Recommendations for Accessway Location and Development’ and the requirements of all applicable federal and state laws governing

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barrier-free access for persons with disabilities, consistent with Pub. Res. Code section 31401.

**CONSISTENCY WITH CONSERVANCY'S 2007  
STRATEGIC PLAN GOAL(S) & OBJECTIVE(S):**

Consistent with **Goal 1, Objective E** of the Conservancy's 2007 Strategic Plan, the proposed authorization would design regional trails along rivers and creeks to connect inland populations to the coast and expand recreational opportunities.

Consistent with **Goal 1, Objective G**, the proposed authorization would assist to secure real property or property interests to facilitate development of inland connecting trails to the California Coastal Trail.

**CONSISTENCY WITH CONSERVANCY'S  
PROJECT SELECTION CRITERIA & GUIDELINES:**

The proposed project is consistent with the Conservancy's Project Selection Criteria and Guidelines, last updated on June 4, 2009, in the following respects:

**Required Criteria**

1. **Promotion of the Conservancy's statutory programs and purposes:** See the "Consistency with Conservancy's Enabling Legislation" section above.
2. **Consistency with purposes of the funding source:** See the "Project Financing" section above.
3. **Support of the public:** The project has been reviewed and endorsed by the San Diego River Conservancy, which includes representatives and elected officials of the City of San Diego. The project has engendered broad support among community groups (Exhibit 4). The San Diego River Coalition, an alliance of 60 organizations, has identified the project on its 2009-2010 work plan.
4. **Location:** The project is located on the lower reach of the San Diego River in the Mission Valley district of San Diego and nearby tributary canyons. Located just inland of the coastal zone, the project would establish a network of trails providing non-motorized access to the San Diego River Trail, the Coastal Trail and beach communities.
5. **Need:** Coastal Conservancy action is needed to advance this project which is a top priority for the San Diego River Conservancy and the groups, agencies and jurisdictions represented on its board.
6. **Greater-than-local interest:** The proposed trail network will connect inland communities with the coast and also promote non-vehicular access to the beach, inland recreational areas and upland neighborhoods for Mission Valley hotel and conference center visitors.

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7. **Sea level rise vulnerability:** This project is located more than five miles inland from the coast and is not vulnerable to sea level rise.

**Additional Criteria**

8. **Urgency:** The feasibility study has advanced long-held community interest in non-vehicular access to the developing San Diego River Trail and coast. The momentum established is ideal for advancing Coastal Conservancy public access objectives.
9. **Resolution of more than one issue:** The project offers an opportunity for an ideal integration of public access, education/interpretation and transportation enhancements. Trail development will also promote stewardship and vegetation management needed to improve habitat quality and vegetation management for wildfire safety.
10. **Conflict resolution:** The San Diego River Conservancy has recognized the absence of trails within the City of San Diego connecting communities to the San Diego River Trail as a serious impediment to delivering its programs. Similarly, the proposed trails would enhance access to the coast greatly improving San Diego's pedestrian/bicycle infrastructure for residents and visitors.
11. **Innovation:** The project represents a unique combination of benefits, combining access to open space with non-motorized transportation.
12. **Readiness:** The San Diego River Conservancy its and nonprofit partners are prepared to aggressively act to implement the San Diego River Tributary Canyons Project recommendations.
18. **Minimization of greenhouse gas emissions:** The proposed project will develop bicycle and pedestrian trails that link neighborhoods to urban centers and a transit line. When implemented, the project will provide for non-motorize transportation alternatives for these neighborhoods.

**CONSISTENCY WITH LOCAL COASTAL PROGRAM POLICIES:**

The project is not located within the coastal zone. However, the project would provide critical links from inland communities to the San Diego River Trail and the Coastal Trail advancing the interest in coastal access contained in the Coastal Act.

The City of San Diego Local Coastal Plan calls for maximum feasible public access to the coastal areas through use of coordinated linkages between pedestrian street crossings, pedestrian bridges, and an improved bikeway system. The proposed trails will provide opportunity that doesn't currently exist for pedestrians and bicyclists to reach the River Trail and the coast.

**COMPLIANCE WITH CEQA:** The proposed project is statutorily and categorically exempt from the provisions of CEQA under 14 California Code of Regulations (CCR), Section 15262 related to planning activities and 14 CCR Section 15306 exempting basic data collection, research, and resource evaluation activities which do not result in a serious or major disturbance

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to an environmental resource. Activities authorized under this recommendation will not result in any significant disturbance to an environmental resource. Upon approval, staff will file a Notice of Exemption for the project.