

COASTAL CONSERVANCY

Staff Recommendation
September 22, 2011

SERRA MUSEUM INTERPRETIVE PLAN

Project No. 11-044-01
Project Manager: Megan Cooper

RECOMMENDED ACTION: Authorization of an amount not to exceed \$150,000 to the San Diego History Center to develop an interpretive plan to make the Junipero Serra Museum a focal point for the history of the San Diego River and facilitate public education about the River's ecological and cultural significance."

LOCATION: San Diego River Watershed, City of San Diego, San Diego County

PROGRAM CATEGORY: Urban Waterfronts

EXHIBITS

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

Exhibit 2: [Sample Museum Exhibits](#)

Exhibit 3: [Project Support Letters](#)

RESOLUTION AND FINDINGS:

Staff recommends that the State Coastal Conservancy adopt the following resolution pursuant to Sections 31300 – 31316 of the Public Resources Code:

"The State Coastal Conservancy hereby authorizes the disbursement of up to one hundred fifty thousand dollars (\$150,000) to the San Diego History Center ("History Center") to develop an interpretive plan to make the Junipero Serra Museum a focal point for the history of the San Diego River and facilitate public education about the River's ecological and cultural significance. Prior to the disbursement of any Conservancy funds, the History Center shall submit for the review and written approval of the Conservancy's Executive Officer a work program, including scope of work, budget and schedule and the names of any contractors it intends to use to carry out the project."

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:

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 7 of Division 21 of the Public Resources Code, regarding Urban Waterfront Restoration.
 3. San Diego History Center is a non-profit cultural, educational, and charitable corporation organized under section 501(c)(3) of the IRS code, and whose purposes include environmental education consistent with Division 21 of the Public Resources Code.”
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PROJECT SUMMARY:

The San Diego History Center (“History Center”) will develop an interpretive plan (“Plan”) featuring the San Diego River (“River”) and its ecological history as key unifying themes for future exhibitions and programs at the Junipero Serra Museum (“Museum”). The Plan will synthesize diverse historical data about the cultural, archaeological, biological, and land use decisions affecting the River, and incorporate it with information about the river’s natural conditions and history of hydromodifications. The Plan will include specifications for future exhibitions and programs at the Museum, along with detailed cost estimates, which will be needed in order to raise the necessary funds to implement the update of the Museum.

The Museum is widely recognized as a San Diego landmark, but its location is underutilized; currently, it draws only approximately 18,500 visitors per year. With the Museum’s location near the mouth of what is arguably the State’s most historic river (Exhibit 1), the History Center and the San Diego River Conservancy (“SDRC”) recognized the potential for the Museum to be a focal point for interpreting the River’s history and educating the public about its ecological and cultural significance. Updating the Museum to focus on the ecological and cultural resources of the River will help SDRC address one of its statutory obligations to protect and interpret cultural and historical resources of the River.

The current exhibitions at the Museum were installed 15-20 years ago. The displays in the main hall are almost exclusively case exhibitions that house small artifacts and text panels. The current exhibitions attempt to tell the story of early San Diego and the growth of the city over time. However, because of their age the exhibitions lack the audio-visual enhancements, computer touch screens, and hands-on components that are currently used to make history more meaningful and engaging for visitors. In addition, the Museum fails to engage visitors in the history and value of the River. The History Center estimates that the total number of visitors could be tripled were it to install new, interactive, visitor-friendly exhibitions. During the development of the proposed interpretative plan for the Serra, the History Center will do audience research to help guarantee that the new exhibitions will address audience needs and interests.

The History Center will develop the Plan in collaboration with SDRC, the San Diego River Coalition, and other pertinent organizations. The Plan will also benefit from the results of a related collaboration involving the History Center, San Diego State University, the San Francisco Estuary Institute, and the Balboa Park Online Collaborative aimed at developing software capable of combining visualizations of historical data created by historical ecologists and those created by history museums to enhance public understanding of the past – and in particular, the process of change over time.

The Plan will result from a combination of historical research, audience research, and community meetings, which will be brought together by a team of leading museum consultants from around the country. A 2009 exhibition about pre-historic Manhattan Island that was developed by the Wildlife Conservation Society for the Museum of the City of New York will serve as a model for this effort (Exhibit 2). The History Center anticipates that the Plan will present the history of San Diego and its namesake river in a fresh way, through interactive exhibits that will also be available for interpretive/educational programs and activities in Presidio Park and at other locations on the River that can be visited by the public. The information will additionally be used for web applications and curriculum materials.

The goals of the new Museum exhibits are to make the insights of historical ecology accessible to students and the general public through an interdisciplinary method that entertains and educates. The Plan will inform people that human culture and the environment are in a continuous dialogue and that this relationship between people and landscape should be viewed holistically. In sum, with the completion of relevant research and creation of a Plan that will guide the development of compelling new visitor experiences, the Museum has the potential to become an even more vibrant cultural attraction in San Diego – one that can help fulfill the educational missions of both the History Center and SDRC while providing enjoyable experiences for a wide range of visitors.

The History Center, its staff, and consultants are ideally equipped to frame the ecological history of the River, its natural resources, and its people within a larger cultural and biological context. The History Center, founded in 1928, serves over 81,000 visitors each year to its Balboa Park location and the Museum, and attracts over 640,000 distinct hits to its website. The History Center is a non-profit cultural, educational, and charitable corporation organized under section 501(c)(3) of the IRS code; it manages approximately \$500,000 in grant funding each year. The History Center's core programs and services include exhibitions, educational programs, the operation of a research library, and scholarly publications. Permanent and changing exhibitions interpret the history of the San Diego region from the period prior to European settlement to the present.

Site Description: The San Diego River runs 52 miles from its headwaters in the Cleveland National Forest in east San Diego County, through Mission Valley and the first settlement in California at Old Town, to the Pacific Ocean at Ocean Beach (Exhibit 1, Figure 1). With a land area of approximately 440 square miles, the San Diego River Watershed is the second largest in San Diego County. It is also the most heavily populated of the county's watersheds.

The Serra Museum, built in 1928 as the first home of the History Center, is one of San Diego's most venerable museums, and it is located at the mouth of the River, one of its most ecologically historic locations. The River and estuary, which originally flowed past the Museum site until they were rerouted in the mid 19th century, are visible from the Museum's grounds, windows, and tower, making this an exceptional site from which to tell the River's story (Exhibit 1). The Museum's tower, including the platform at its summit, provides sweeping, 360 degree views that encompass the River, Old Town, and the San Diego Bay. The Museum was built on Presidio Hill, right above Old Town San Diego, to commemorate the site where Franciscan Padre Junípero Serra and Captain Gaspar de Portolá had built the first Spanish settlement in Alta California in 1769. The proximity of the River was one of the primary factors involved in selecting the mission's original site. The Museum and surrounding land, including the sites of the

Mission of San Diego de Alcala and the Presidio, are owned by the City of San Diego and the area is known as Presidio Park. The History Center operates the Museum on behalf of the City under a lease that has no termination date.

Project History: The Museum has housed a variety of exhibitions such as artifacts, art, and furniture since it opened to the public in 1929. In 2010 the History Center and SDRC began exploring the opportunity of adopting the River and historical ecology as key unifying themes in new exhibitions and programs to be developed for the site.

This project is consistent with the San Diego River Conservancy Five Year Strategic and Infrastructure Plan, adopted by the SDRC on March 24, 2006. The project helps to implement Program 3, Natural and Cultural Resources Preservation and Restoration.

PROJECT FINANCING

<u>Coastal Conservancy</u>	<u>150,000</u>
Total Project Costs	150,000

The anticipated source of funds for this project is the FY 2008/2009 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) for projects of the SDRC. These funds may be used to “promote access to and enjoyment of the coastal resources of the state” in accordance with Division 21 of the Public Resources Code (Pub. Res. Code § 75060 (b)). The Interpretive Plan for the Serra Museum will help promote access to and enjoyment of the coastal resources of the state by envisioning a museum that interprets the ecological and cultural significance of the San Diego River. As discussed below the project is consistent with Chapter 7 of Division 21, Pub. Res. Code.

CONSISTENCY WITH CONSERVANCY’S ENABLING LEGISLATION:

The proposed project would be undertaken pursuant to Chapter 7, Urban Waterfront Restoration (§31300 - 31316), of the Conservancy's enabling legislation, Division 21 of the Public Resources Code. Section 31305 directs the Conservancy to stimulate urban waterfront projects that exhibit “innovation in sensitively integrating manmade features into the natural coastal environment.” By developing a plan to highlight and explore the role of the River in the urban environment, this project will enhance public perception of the compatibility between the urban interface with and the natural coastal environment.

Consistent with Section 31307 the Conservancy may award grants to nonprofit organizations for the restoration of urban coastal waterfront areas. This project will enable the History Center to present the historical and cultural significance of the River, which will increase public support

for River restoration. Section 31308 authorizes the Conservancy to provide up to the total cost of any urban waterfront project

Section 31316 authorizes the Conservancy to undertake projects and award grants for activities within urban coastal watershed areas that are compatible with the preservation of coastal or watershed resources, or that facilitate environmental education related to these resources. These projects or activities may include, but are not limited to, exhibits emphasizing coastal or watershed resource education, or the development of amenities and infrastructure consistent with this chapter. The Serra Museum Interpretive Plan will facilitate environmental education and the development of amenities consistent with this chapter.

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

Consistent with **Goal 3, Objective C** of the Conservancy’s 2007 Strategic Plan, the proposed project will support the planning and design of interpretive and educational displays and exhibits at the Serra Museum that will emphasize coastal and watershed ecological resources. The number of visitors to the museum is expected to significantly increase as a result of implementing the plan.

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

The proposed project is consistent with the Conservancy’s Project Selection Criteria and Guidelines 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 board of the San Diego River Conservancy has endorsed this project as has the Director of the San Diego River Park Foundation and Senator Christine Kehoe (See Exhibit 3).
4. **Location:** The proposed project would be located outside, but immediately adjacent to, the coastal zone of the City of San Diego, San Diego County.
5. **Need:** A detailed interpretative plan incorporating exhibit and program specifications along with detailed cost estimates will be needed in order to raise the necessary funds to reinterpret the Serra Museum. The funding available to develop plans such as the one proposed are difficult to attain and the project will not move forward without Conservancy funds.
6. **Greater-than-local interest:** As the site of the first European settlement in the State, the Presidio and the adjacent San Diego River are arguably some of the most historic sites in

California. Educating the public on the history of the River and its importance to the creation of our State will serve residents throughout the State and visitors from around the world.

7. **Sea level rise vulnerability:** The Serra Museum is not located in an area that will be affected by sea level rise.

Additional Criteria

12. **Innovation:** The exhibits that are envisioned for the Serra Museum will be at the cutting edge of interpretive and educational technology. Recent projects that will serve as models for the Plan have involved digital watersheds, floor-to-ceiling digital displays, and interactive audio and visual exhibits.
13. **Readiness:** The grantee is ready to assemble the consultant team immediately to get the project started.
14. **Cooperation:** The History Center, a non-profit organization, will work in cooperation with SDRC, a State agency, and the San Diego River Coalition, a community organization.
15. **Vulnerability from climate change impacts other than sea level rise:** Neither the Plan nor the implementation of the Plan will be vulnerable to climate change impacts.
16. **Minimization of greenhouse gas emissions:** Remote meetings will be utilized whenever possible in the development of the Plan in order to reduce greenhouse gas emissions.

CONSISTENCY WITH LOCAL COASTAL PROGRAM POLICIES:

This project is located outside of the coastal zone. However, the implementation of the Plan will have a positive impact on the coastal resources within the coastal zone of the City of San Diego.

By facilitating education about the River and its historical importance and hydromodification, the Plan will inspire current and future generations to “preserve the natural features and beauty of the coastline adjacent to Ocean Beach”, which is a priority of the Ocean Beach Precise Plan and Local Coastal Program (LCP) addendum (adopted November 25, 1980), which serve as the City of San Diego’s certified LCP for the area of the San Diego River Estuary/flood-control channel.

The Plan will also help to implement the Mission Bay Park Master Plan (adopted 1994, last amended 2002), which serves as the City’s certified LCP for the Mission Bay area. The Master Plan recommends that, “Environmental education should not be restricted to the habitat areas of the Park. A program of Park-wide interpretive signs should be conceived and implemented, to inform the public of Mission Bay’s unique environment.” Because visitors can see Mission Bay from the Serra Museum, and will learn about the River’s previous connection to the Bay, the Plan will effectively expand the environmental education program of Mission Bay Park.

COMPLIANCE WITH CEQA: The proposed project is statutorily exempt from the provisions of CEQA under 14 California Code of Regulations, Section 15262 exempting feasibility studies for possible future actions that the Conservancy has not approved, adopted or funded and which

do not require preparation of an EIR or negative declaration. Staff will file a Notice of Exemption upon approval of the proposed project.