

COASTAL CONSERVANCY

Staff Recommendation

October 2, 2014

TIJUANA RIVER VALLEY REGIONAL PARK PUBLIC USE FEASIBILITY STUDY

Project No. 14-036-01

Project Manager: Sam Jenniches

RECOMMENDED ACTION: Authorization to disburse up to \$100,000 to the County of San Diego to develop a public use feasibility study for the Tijuana River Valley Regional Park in San Diego County.

LOCATION: Tijuana River Valley Regional Park, San Diego, San Diego County

PROGRAM CATEGORY: Public Access

EXHIBITS

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

Exhibit 2: [Project Photos](#)

Exhibit 3: [Project Letters](#)

RESOLUTION AND FINDINGS:

Staff recommends that the State Coastal Conservancy adopt the following resolution pursuant to Sections 31400 *et seq.* of the Public Resources Code:

“The State Coastal Conservancy hereby authorizes the disbursement of an amount not to exceed one hundred thousand dollars (\$100,000) to the County of San Diego (County) for the development of a public use feasibility study for the Tijuana River Valley Regional Park. Prior to the disbursement of any Conservancy funds, the County shall submit for review and approval of the Executive Officer of the Conservancy a work program, schedule and budget, and the names of any contractors that it intends to employ for this planning work.”

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 authorization is consistent with Chapter 9 of Division 21 of the Public Resources Code (sections 31400-31409) regarding a system of public accessways.
2. The proposed project is consistent with the current Conservancy Project Selection Criteria and Guidelines.

3. The proposed project serves greater than local need.”

PROJECT SUMMARY:

Staff recommends authorization to disburse an amount not to exceed \$100,000 to the County of San Diego (County) to develop a public use feasibility study for the Tijuana River Valley Regional Park (TRVRP) in San Diego County.

The overall project entails the preparation of a public use feasibility study for County-related projects and initiatives across the entirety of the TRVRP, and the preparation of an economic analysis for projects identified as part of the feasibility study. The goal of the feasibility study and economic analysis is to identify a comprehensive and coordinated set of implementable actions for providing visitor-serving uses and amenities on County-owned lands within the Tijuana River Valley. The public use feasibility study and economic analysis would analyze visitor-serving uses not addressed in the TRVRP Trails and Habitat Enhancement Project Environmental Impact Report, funded by the Conservancy in 2003 and completed in December of 2006. These additional activities would serve to enhance the existing trail system and increase public access to the TRVRP.

The preparation of the feasibility study will include review of all existing plans relevant to open space and recreation for the valley and create a summary plan that presents a combined view of the elements of each plan. Geographic Information System (GIS) data will be used to collect high-level information on biological resources, transportation networks, topographic mapping, hydrology, existing land uses, existing utilities and infrastructure information. The collected information will be analyzed to determine potential conflicts between plans and/or gaps not addressed by existing plans.

Additionally, the feasibility study will include an opportunities analysis to identify other activities compatible with the County’s mission and priorities for the TRVRP. One specific need that will be addressed is the identification of a suitable location for a campground facility. Appropriate sites will be analyzed using GIS and subject matter experts to review site recreational value, site suitability, presence of cultural and biological resources, accessibility from local roadways, land use data, onsite and offsite infrastructure needs. Other activities that may be considered in the feasibility study are mountain biking, agritourism, and experiential learning. These activities will be selected based on input from the County as well as researching activities at other parks and similar facilities, including those near international borders and those with multiple management priorities.

The feasibility study will articulate a vision for County-owned lands within the Tijuana River Valley and include recommendations for achieving that vision. The recommendations will potentially address needs for specific facilities, support structures (utility or transportation improvements), funding and financing, environmental management, and partnerships.

The public use feasibility study will also include an economic analysis component to further refine the comprehensive list of implementable public use activities. The economic analysis will be integrated into the final development of the public use feasibility study with an iterative approach to prioritizing the feasible public use activities.

For the priority visitor-serving uses, information will be gathered about: 1) the state of the industry to determine the potential for growth in the region, including information on user demographics, expenditures where available, national market size where available, industry standards, industry trends, and user requirements and preferences; 2) case studies that include user demographics, regional tourism data, area and site information, amenities, pricing, length of stay, and occupancy; and 3) an order of magnitude estimate of revenue from a typical facility, with additional detail in terms of specific facilities and revenue streams at the facility level where available.

Finally, the economic analysis will provide cost estimates for implementing each priority recommendation. The completed public use feasibility study will identify a set of implementable actions for providing visitor-serving uses and amenities on County-owned lands within the Tijuana River Valley.

San Diego County Department of Parks and Recreation maintains and enhances the quality of life in San Diego County by providing parks and recreational opportunities for residents and visitors. Their award winning parks system includes local and regional parks, campgrounds, 300 miles of trails, fishing lakes, state-of-the-art recreation centers and sports complexes, ecological preserves, and open space preserves. This park system is the legacy of many successful individual projects implemented through collaboration with local, state and federal partners. The County is uniquely qualified to undertake this project as the agency with jurisdiction over the TRVRP and a history of completing similar plans within their parks system.

Site Description: The TRVRP measures approximately 1,800 acres and is located south of the city of Imperial Beach and the southern neighborhoods of the City of San Diego, and just north of the Border Highlands and the international border. Located west of Interstate 5, the park is entirely within the coastal zone and adjoins Border Field State Park and Tijuana Slough National Wildlife Refuge on the west. Though degraded by human activity, the valley's natural resources are among the most valued in San Diego County, largely because of the contiguous assemblage of habitats that extend east from the beach to the urban areas along Interstate 5. Among these habitats are sand dune, saltmarsh, riparian lowlands, and coastal sage scrub upland. With much of the region's endemic habitat lost, each of the remnant habitats that exist in the valley are rare and support numerous state and federal listed plants, birds, insects, and reptiles. Extensive urban development has occurred in southwestern San Diego County, promising to bring a large increase in use of the Tijuana River Valley public lands.

The County has acquired over 1,700 acres for the development of the TRVRP. The park proposes over 22-miles of trails, an equestrian center, and active recreation complex and community park amenities. The project area is included in the Multiple Species Conservation Program (MSCP) Subarea Plan adopted by the City of San Diego in the context of the county-wide Natural Community Conservation Plan (NCCP).

Project History: In 2003, the Conservancy authorized a grant of \$1,000,000 to the County of San Diego Department of Parks and Recreation to design and evaluate the environmental benefits and impacts of an integrated program of habitat restoration and public access improvements in the 2000-acre portion of the TRVRP that lies immediately adjacent to the Tijuana Estuary. The County used the Conservancy grant to complete the detailed planning needed to set the stage for fully restoring the valuable habitat in close consultation with the parties involved in the MSCP, including the City, and state and federal resource and regulatory

agencies, as well as other stakeholders. The County also identified alignments for the Coastal Trail, the inland linkage to the coast, and other park trails that would best serve recreational uses while also protecting wildlife habitat. The County approved the "Tijuana River Valley Regional Park Trails and Habitat Enhancement Plan & Final Environmental Impact Report" in December 2006 and is implementing the plan over the next several years.

Subsequently, the Conservancy authorized grants totaling \$1,950,000 in May of 2012 and February of 2013 for the construction of trails as part of the Tijuana River Valley Trail System. These trails are scheduled to be completed in 2015 and, along with other trail projects in the TRVRP, will result in the completion of all valley bottom trails proposed in the TRVRP.

The development of the current project arose out of the County's desire to create low cost accommodations near or within the TRVRP. The Conservancy has been an integral partner for projects within the Tijuana River Valley for more than 30 years, ranging from acquisition to habitat restoration to public access. Collaboration on this feasibility study will ensure that projects within the Tijuana River Valley continue to address the needs of a dynamic ecosystem while providing increased access and economic development in this county resource that boasts regional, state and international significance.

PROJECT FINANCING

Coastal Conservancy	\$100,000
County of San Diego General Fund	\$106,000
Project Total	\$206,000

Conservancy funding for this project will be matched at greater than 1:1 by the San Diego County General Fund.

The expected source of funds for this project is the FY 2013 appropriation to the Conservancy from the Safe Neighborhood Parks, Clean Water, Clean Air, and Coastal Protection Bond Fund, Public Resources Code section 75001 et seq. (Proposition 84). This funding may be expended, consistent with the Conservancy's enabling statutes, for the protection and enjoyment of San Diego Bay and adjacent watersheds as specified in Section 75060(f) of the Public Resources Code. Proposition 84 defines protection activities to include actions "necessary to allow the continued use and enjoyment of property or natural resources". (Pub. Res. Code § 75005(m)). As specified in Section 75072.6, "San Diego Bay and adjacent watersheds" includes the coastal and bay watersheds within San Diego County, such as the Tijuana River Watershed. The project is undertaken consistent with Chapter 9 of the Conservancy's enabling statute, as discussed below.

In addition to the contribution by the County, its Department of Parks and Recreation will provide in kind the approximate equivalent of \$20,000 in staff project administration time.

CONSISTENCY WITH CONSERVANCY'S ENABLING LEGISLATION:

The proposed project is consistent with the following sections of Chapter 9 of Division 21 of the Public Resources Code, which directs the Conservancy to take a principal role in the implementation of a system of public accessways to and along the state's coastline. The project

is consistent with Section 31400.1, which authorizes the Conservancy to award access development grants to any public agency, provided that the resulting public accessways will serve more than local public needs. This project will enhance access in the Tijuana River Valley Regional Park which is located in an area of regional, state and international significance.

Consistent with Section 31400.3, the project would aid the County in establishing a system of public coastal accessways and related functions. This project will provide a plan for future public use needs within Tijuana River Valley Regional Park, capitalizing on an extensive existing trail system that connects to the California Coastal Trail and inland communities.

Section 31409 authorizes the Conservancy to award grants and provide assistance to public agencies to establish and expand those inland trail systems that may be linked to the California Coastal Trail. The County of San Diego Department of Parks and Recreation is a public agency that owns the Tijuana River Valley Regional Park on which the Tijuana River Valley Regional Park trail project traverses and eventually connects to the California Coastal Trail and is thus eligible for Conservancy assistance under this section.

CONSISTENCY WITH CONSERVANCY'S 2013 STRATEGIC PLAN GOAL(S) & OBJECTIVE(S):

Consistent with **Goal 2, Objective C** of the Conservancy's 2013-2018 Strategic Plan, the proposed project would design facilities to increase and enhance coastal recreational opportunities.

Consistent with **Goal 9, Objective A** of the Conservancy's 2013-2018 Strategic Plan, the proposed project would support programs and events that improve public understanding of coastal resources.

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 November 10, 2011, 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 enjoys regional support including Assemblywomen Toni Atkins and Lorena Gonzalez, Senator Ben Hueso, County District 1 Supervisor Greg Cox, the City of Imperial Beach, the City of San Diego, the Southwest Wetlands Interpretive Association, and the Tijuana River Valley Equestrian Association. See letters in Exhibit 3.
4. **Location:** The proposed project is located within the coastal zone of San Diego, San Diego County.

5. **Need:** Without Conservancy support, this project would be postponed until the County could find an alternate source of funding for this planning project.
6. **Greater-than-local interest:** The Tijuana River Valley Regional Park is located in an area of considerable regional, state and international significance across the topics of social, political and environmental systems. As such, the TRVRP serves visitors from local, state, national and international origins.
7. **Sea level rise vulnerability:** The westernmost edge of the project is located approximately 1.1 miles from shore and at a minimum elevation of 15 feet. As such, it is not expected to be vulnerable to sea level rise impacts.

Additional Criteria

10. **Leverage:** The grantee is providing significant match and in-kind services as discussed in the “Project Financing” section, above.
13. **Readiness:** If approved, the County is prepared to complete the planning effort by July, 2015.
14. **Realization of prior Conservancy goals:** See “Project History” section, above.
17. **Vulnerability from climate change impacts other than sea level rise:** This project will actively consider vulnerability from climate change impacts other than sea level rise, such as increased fire risk, drought, habitat succession and species loss, in the development of a Public Use Feasibility study that reflects feasible and appropriate development potential.

CONSISTENCY WITH LOCAL COASTAL PROGRAM POLICIES:

The Tijuana River Valley Local Coastal Program Land Use Plan (LCPLUP) serves as the Local LCP¹ and General Plan Community Plan for the Tijuana River Valley. The LCPLUP designates portions of the TRVRP as “Multiple Species Conservation Open Space” and “Other Community Open Space/Agricultural.”

According to the LCPLUP “The entire Tijuana River Regional Park area... [is] considered to be generally compatible with the Multi Habitat Planning Area (MHPA) even though many of the proposed uses are not specifically habitat-related.” Specifically, the following goals, objectives, and recommendations from the LCPLUP allow for and will be considered when identifying new recreational activities:

Multiple Species Conservation Open Space

- Intermix the natural habitat with compatible agricultural, recreational and water quality improvement activities, all functioning in concert to maintain and enhance natural ecosystems and the local quality of life and environment.
- Limit disturbance of natural open space areas to horseback riding, mountain biking and hiking trails and passive recreational uses such as photography, bird watching and nature study that are consistent with preservation of natural resources.

¹ Certified by the Coastal Commission [1988].

- Contain active recreational uses planned for the valley in areas determined appropriate for such activities by the county's Regional Park Plan and consistent with the Local Coastal Program Land Use Plan.
- Consider additional recreational uses, as appropriate, along the edge of an open space area or in the relatively limited open space areas that do not contain sensitive habitat and wildlife.... In those natural open space areas which are part of large regional parks, the park master plan should designate the appropriate areas for various types and intensities of recreational use.

Other Community Open Space/Agricultural

- Establish an open space system which provides for the preservation of natural resources, the managed production of resources, the provision of outdoor recreation, the protection of public health and safety, and the utilization of the varied terrain and natural drainage systems of the region to guide the form of adjacent urban development.
- Retain premium agriculturally productive lands in agricultural usage.
- Provide a range of opportunities for active and passive recreation in the valley.
- Make fullest possible use of multi-purpose planning to expand recreational opportunities, including a variety of compatible recreation activities within a given site; passive recreation combined with cultural resource preservation; and appropriate recreational use of open space lands and wildlife conservation areas and water resources.
- Permit more active recreational uses, including camping, athletic fields, and other organized sports activities. Where necessary, incorporate measures to avoid/minimize impacts to biological resources within the MHPA.”

COMPLIANCE WITH CEQA:

The proposed planning project is statutorily exempt from CEQA pursuant to 14 California Code of Regulations Section 15262, because it involves only planning studies for possible future actions which the Conservancy has not yet approved, adopted or funded. Staff will file a Notice of Exemption upon Conservancy approval.