

COASTAL CONSERVANCY

Staff Recommendation
January 29, 2015

SAN DIEGO RIVER PHASE I INTERPRETIVE PROJECTS

Project No.14-051-01
Project Manager: Joan Cardellino

RECOMMENDED ACTION: Authorization to disburse up to \$270,000 to the San Diego River Conservancy to implement both Phase I of the Junípero Serra Museum Interpretive Master Plan and the City of Santee's San Diego River Trail Mural Project.

LOCATION: Cities of San Diego and Santee, San Diego County

PROGRAM CATEGORY: Urban Waterfronts Program

EXHIBITS

- Exhibit 1: [Project Location Maps](#)
- Exhibit 2: [2013 Junípero Serra Museum Interpretive Master Plan](#)
- Exhibit 3: [Site Photos-San Diego River Trail Mural Project](#)
- Exhibit 4: [Project Letters, Resolutions](#)

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 two hundred seventy thousand dollars (\$270,000) to the San Diego River Conservancy for: 1) Phase I of the *2013 Junípero Serra Museum Interpretive Master Plan*, and 2) the City of Santee's San Diego River Trail Mural Project, each subject to the following conditions:

1. Prior to the disbursement of any Conservancy funds, the San Diego River Conservancy shall submit for review and approval of the Executive Officer of the Coastal Conservancy a work program including a detailed budget and schedule, and the names of any contractors to be employed in carrying out the work.
2. Coastal Conservancy funding shall be acknowledged by erecting and maintaining at the project site or at other appropriate locations a sign or emblem, the design, placement and duration of which shall be approved by the Coastal Conservancy Executive Officer.”

SAN DIEGO RIVER PHASE I – INTERPRETIVE 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 authorization is consistent with Chapter 7 of Division 21 of the Public Resources Code.
 2. The proposed project is consistent with the current (October 2, 2014) Project Selection Criteria and Guidelines.”
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PROJECT SUMMARY:

This authorization proposes to provide funding to the San Diego River Conservancy (SDRC) for two projects to provide interpretation and amenities along and overlooking the San Diego River. The first project will implement the San Diego History Center’s Phase I of the *2013 Junípero Serra Museum Interpretive Master Plan*.

A) Phase I of the Serra Museum Interpretive Master Plan

Phase I will involve historical research to inform the design and location of interpretive materials, both inside and outside the museum. Work under this grant will include the research, detailed programming, design, fabrication, and installation of exhibits and interpretive panels focusing on the historical relationship between the San Diego River and its role in the foundation of the City of San Diego and the State of California. The goal of the project is to educate the general public about the historical ecology of the area and its relationship to the cultural and economic development of the City. Additionally, the grant will help support new educational content based upon the new exhibits to further enhance and expand the educational programs the History Center provides to visitors and school groups. The exhibits will be bilingual (English/Spanish) and provide additional content for the Serra Museum webpage of the San Diego History Center.

The History Center is ideally equipped to frame the ecological history of the river, its natural resources, and its people within a larger biological context. The museum is located near the mouth of what is one of the state’s most historic rivers. The History Center and the SDRC recognize the unique 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 San Diego River will help SDRC accomplish its goal of protecting and interpreting cultural and historical resources of the San Diego River.

B) City of Santee’s San Diego River Trail Mural Project

SDRC will work with the City of Santee to implement Santee’s San Diego River Trail Mural Project. The goal of the Santee Mural Project is to enhance the trail with public art murals on the unsightly utility boxes and bridge overpass support structures. The project will improve the user’s experience and address segments of the trail that are prone to tagging and graffiti. This interpretive project will take on themes consistent with the ecological, historical, and cultural

SAN DIEGO RIVER PHASE I – INTERPRETIVE PROJECT

content of the Serra Museum or themes appropriate to the immediate trail settings. Professional muralists will work with community groups to design and paint the murals.

Site Descriptions: The San Diego River runs 52 miles from the headwaters in the Cleveland National Forest in east San Diego County, through Mission Valley and the first settlement in California at Old Town, and out to the Pacific at Ocean Beach. The San Diego River watershed is the second largest watershed in San Diego County, and is 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 2). The Museum's tower, including the platform at its summit, provides sweeping, 360-degree views that encompass the river, Old Town, and 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 Alcalá and the Presidio, are owned by the City of San Diego and the area is known as Presidio Park. (See Exhibit 1). The History Center operates the Museum on behalf of the City under a lease that has no termination date.

The City of Santee is located approximately 18 miles east of the Sierra Museum. The city is bisected by the San Diego River which creates a greenbelt of more than 1,100 acres of natural riparian habitat. The City contains more than 4 miles of the San Diego River Trail which wanders through portions of the trail previously funded by the Coastal Conservancy in cooperation with the SDRC. These projects include the Walker property acquired in 2011 and planning for Carlton Oaks segment of the San Diego River Trail in 2012.

Project History: In 2010, the History Center and SDRC began exploring the opportunity of adopting the San Diego River and its historical ecology as a key focus to unify themes in new exhibitions and programs to be developed for the site.

In September 22, 2011 the Coastal Conservancy authorized funds to develop a conceptual interpretive plan that would focus on the history of the San Diego River and facilitate public education about the river's ecological and cultural significance. In 2013, *The Junípero Serra Museum Interpretive Master Plan* (Exhibit 2) was completed, and is the basis for this Phase I of the Interpretive Master Plan. The proposed museum projects will implement the first phase of improvements identified in the Master Plan.

The San Diego River Trail Mural Projects was first conceived by the San Diego River Park Foundation as a volunteer activity to create public art for the San Diego River Park System. The project has been in existence for seven years and continues help engage the community in taking ownership of the San Diego River. Murals completed to date include such themes "River Life", "Our River" and "On The River Trail". Photos of these murals can be seen in Exhibit 3.

SAN DIEGO RIVER PHASE I – INTERPRETIVE PROJECT

PROJECT FINANCING

Coastal Conservancy	\$270,000
County of San Diego	\$10,000
Project Total	\$280,000

The expected source for the Conservancy funds for this project is the fiscal year 2010/11 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). Proposition 84 authorizes the use of bond funds for the protection of San Diego Bay and adjacent watersheds consistent with the Conservancy’s enabling statute. (*See* Public Resources Code §75060(f)). Activities that protect a watershed include actions necessary to allow the continued use and enjoyment of property or natural resources and include interpretation of those resources for the public. (*Id.*, §75005(m)). Both projects will improve public understanding and enjoyment of the river’s natural resources. These projects are consistent with the Conservancy’s enabling legislation as discussed below.

The San Diego History Center will contribute in-kind services estimated at \$100,000, including: rare archival materials (documents and photographs) relating to the San Diego River to be used as the basis for the exhibits, volunteer time and expertise by members of the Junípero Serra Museum Interpretive Plan Advisory Council which consists of a variety of expert historians, geologists, anthropologists, planners and educators.

CONSISTENCY WITH CONSERVANCY’S ENABLING LEGISLATION:

The proposed project would be undertaken pursuant to Chapter 7 (§§ 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.” Both projects will highlight and explore the role of the River in the urban environment. These projects are designed to enhance public perception of the compatibility between the urban and natural, coastal environments. Santee’s Mural project in particular will integrate various concrete structures along the trail into the natural setting of the river.

Section 31308 authorizes the Conservancy to provide up to the total cost of any urban waterfront project, taking into account consideration of such factors as the fiscal resources of the applicant, the innovation used in design of the project, and other priorities discussed in the Project Selection section below. 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 exhibits emphasizing coastal or watershed resource education as well as the development of amenities and infrastructure consistent with this chapter. Both projects are within a coastal watershed. Phase I of the Serra Museum project will create and install interpretive exhibits that will educate the public about the significance of the San Diego River’s natural resources to the region’s cultural and economic development. Also, the City of Santee’s San Diego River Mural project will promote conservation of the San Diego river habitat along the river trail, and provide mural images of the relations of river ecology and coastal resources, in an urban setting.

SAN DIEGO RIVER PHASE I – INTERPRETIVE PROJECT

Consistent with Section 31316 the San Diego River Trail Mural project will design and install historical themes that focus on the ecology and history of the San Diego River. The themes are intended to be consistent with those developed for the Serra Museum and thereby enhance trail users' awareness of the environmental and recreational importance of the San Diego River.

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

Consistent with **Goal 9, Objective B** this project will provide interpretive and educational displays related to coastal, watershed, and ocean-resource education, maritime history and climate change.

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 October 2, 2014, 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.
1. **Promotion and implementation of state plans and policies:** The proposed project serves to promote and implement the plans and policies of the *California Water Action Plan* (California Natural Resources Agency, 2014). In particular, the project promotes Action #1 of that Plan - *Make Conservation a California Way of Life* – in that the elements of Santee's San Diego River Trail Mural Project will raise the awareness of the average visitor to history, current drought conditions and future significance of water conservation. The Serra Museum work will educate the public on the importance of water in the San Diego region and how the river has been manipulated historically.
2. **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 4, Project Letters).
3. **Location:** The proposed projects are located within a coastal-draining watershed. Consistent with section 31316 of the Public Resources Code, the Conservancy may undertake projects within urban coastal watershed areas that facilitate environmental education related to coastal resources. The key feature in the Serra Museum Interpretive Phase I and in Santee's Mural Project is the overarching theme of the San Diego River, its habitat, ecology and the role it plays in coastal resources and San Diego history.
4. **Need:** This project will improve visitors' experience of the San Diego River Trail and the Serra Museum by providing important esthetic and educational interpretive exhibits. Funding from the Conservancy will help both the Serra Museum and the SDRC reach their respective goals for public education about the river.

SAN DIEGO RIVER PHASE I – INTERPRETIVE PROJECT

5. **Greater-than-local interest:** The Museum site 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 visitors from the entire County and beyond. The San Diego River Area boasts no less than twenty-nine State Historic Landmarks, four National Historic Landmarks, three state parks, twenty local and municipal parks and public open spaces, as well as rich cultural resources.
6. **Sea level rise vulnerability:** The Serra Museum is located on a promontory at an elevation of 137 feet above sea level, and approximately 4.5 miles from the Pacific Ocean, so it is not vulnerable to sea level rise. The San Diego River Trail murals will also be located three to four miles from areas vulnerable to sea level rise.

Additional Criteria

7. **Urgency:** The authorization is time sensitive for project startup as existing matching funds for the City of Santee Mural Project (\$10,000 grant) could be lost if Conservancy funding is not available as a match.
8. **Leverage:** See the “Project Financing” section above.
12. **Readiness:** The grantee is ready to assemble the consultant team immediately to get the Museum project started, and the Santee is ready to implement the mural project.
13. **Cooperation:** The History Center, a non-profit organization, will work in cooperation with SDRC, and the San Diego River Coalition, a conglomerate of community organizations. The City of Santee is working directly with SDRC to implement the San Diego River Trail Mural project to interpret the San Diego River along the trail.
14. **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.

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 as the area is within a coastal-draining watershed.

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

The Serra Museum project will help 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

SAN DIEGO RIVER PHASE I – INTERPRETIVE PROJECT

the Bay, the Phase I will effectively expand the environmental education program of Mission Bay Park.

COMPLIANCE WITH CEQA:

The Serra Museum project is categorically exempt from review under the California Environmental Quality Act (CEQA) pursuant to 14 California Code of Regulations 15301(a) which exempts minor alterations to existing public structures or facilities. The project involves minor “interior or exterior alterations involving such things as interior partitions . . . electrical conveyances” etc. to existing public structures, involving negligible or no expansion of use beyond that existing at the time of review. The project improvements are within and on the exterior of the Museum.

Similarly, the City of Santee’s San Diego River Trail Mural project is exempt as it involves the repair, maintenance and minor alterations to existing facilities. The project will clean up and install interpretive murals on existing structures along the San Diego River.

Staff will file a Notice of Exemption upon approval of the proposed project.