

COASTAL CONSERVANCY

Staff Recommendation

June 18, 2020

**SANTA ANA RIVER TRAIL  
RIVERSIDE COUNTY  
HAMNER AVENUE BRIDGE CONSTRUCTION**

File No. 11-023-04

Project Manager: Greg Gauthier

**RECOMMENDED ACTION:** Authorize disbursement of up to \$2,965,000 to the Riverside County Regional Parks and Open Space District for construction of a segment of trail and two access ramps for the Santa Ana River Trail as part of the Hamner Avenue Bridge construction project and adopt findings under the California Environmental Quality Act.

**LOCATION:** Santa Ana River Parkway, along the Santa Ana River in Riverside County at the Hamner Avenue Bridge in the City of Norco.

**PROGRAM CATEGORY:** Santa Ana River Conservancy Program

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**EXHIBITS**

- Exhibit 1: [Project Location Map](#)
  - Exhibit 2: [Current and New Bridge Images](#)
  - Exhibit 3: [Initial Study and Mitigated Negative Declaration: Hamner Avenue Bridge Replacement Project](#)
  - Exhibit 4: [Project Letters](#)
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**RESOLUTION AND FINDINGS:**

Staff recommends that the State Coastal Conservancy adopt the following resolution pursuant to Sections 31170 *et seq.* of the Public Resources Code:

“The State Coastal Conservancy hereby authorizes disbursement of an amount not to exceed two million nine hundred sixty five thousand dollars (\$2,965,000) to the Riverside County Regional Parks and Open Space District (District) for construction of a segment of trail and two access ramps for the Santa Ana River Trail as part of the Hamner Avenue Bridge construction project.”

Prior to disbursement of funds to the District, the Conservancy’s Executive Officer shall review and approve in writing:

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.
5. Evidence that the District has entered into agreements sufficient to enable the District to implement, operate, and maintain 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 authorization is consistent with the purposes and objectives of Chapter 4.6 of Division 21 of the Public Resources Code, regarding the Santa Ana River Conservancy Program and funding for recreational opportunities and trails.
2. The proposed project will serve greater than local needs.
3. The proposed authorization is consistent with the current Project Selection Criteria and Guidelines.
4. The Conservancy has independently reviewed the Hamner Avenue Bridge Replacement Project Initial Study with Proposed Mitigated Negative Declaration adopted by the City of Norco on April 18, 2019. The Conservancy finds that the project as designed avoids, reduces or mitigates the potentially significant environmental effects to a less-than-significant level, and there is no substantial evidence that the project may have a significant effect on the environment, as defined in 14 Cal. Code Regulations Section 15382.”

**PROJECT SUMMARY:**

Staff recommends the Conservancy authorize disbursement of up to \$2,965,000 to the Riverside County Regional Parks and Open Space District (District) for construction of a 0.28-mile segment of the Santa Ana River Trail across Hamner Avenue Bridge in the City of Norco,

Riverside County. The trail will be multi-purpose and will include a fenced walkway across the bridge to accommodate pedestrians, hikers, bicyclists and equestrians. In addition to the multi-purpose trail segment, the proposed project will construct two access ramps, one on either side of the bridge.

The trail and access ramps project to be funded by the proposed authorization will be constructed as a component of the Hamner Avenue Bridge replacement project, which is being funded through other sources. The current bridge is 80 years old and structurally deficient. It is 36 feet wide with one lane in each direction and one narrow and unsafe sidewalk. The bridge is subject to flooding during major storm events. The bridge replacement project will expand the bridge to three lanes in each direction to accommodate future traffic projections, as well as the multi-use trail segment

The new trail segment and two access ramps will connect a 23.5-mile completed section of trail from the City of Norco to Waterman Avenue in the City of San Bernardino, to a 2.5-mile section of trail from Hamner Avenue to Archibald Street in the City of Eastvale. This will establish a 26-mile continuous stretch of Santa Ana River Trail, or just over one-quarter of the entire projected trail length. This length of trail passes through numerous disadvantaged communities and will provide a healthy alternative for bicycle commuter use throughout the region.

This critical linkage on the Santa Ana River Trail will provide a connection between the Hidden Valley Wildlife Area and the City of Norco on the south side of the river, to the Silver Lakes Equestrian and Sports Park, Eastvale Community Park, Riverwalk Park, and City of Eastvale on the north side of the river. Eastvale was incorporated in 2010 and has worked over the past decade to develop its riverfront as a recreational resource for its residents and visitors. The City of Norco is known as "Horse Town USA" and has one of the largest networks of horse trails in the country. This network connects to the Santa Ana River Trail.

**Site Description:** The proposed project will occur where Hamner Avenue Bridge crosses the Santa Ana River from the City of Norco to the City of Eastvale. The Corona-Norco-Eastvale area encompasses the Prado Dam and surrounding flood control basin, the Corona Municipal Airport, Orange County Water District conservation lands, and the residential communities of the cities of Corona, Norco, and Eastvale. The Santa Ana River at this location is soft-bottom, and not channelized, with cottonwood forest and black willow riparian habitat that supports least Bell's vireo, the Santa Ana sucker, and a variety of bat species.

The Santa Ana River watershed drains approximately 3,200 square miles, including portions of San Bernardino, Riverside and Orange counties. According to 2016 census data the population of Riverside County, San Bernardino County and Orange County combined is 7.7 million. Almost 20 percent of all the people in the state live in these three counties.

The Santa Ana River watershed supports hundreds of species of birds, fish and amphibians, including more than a dozen protected rare or endangered species such as least Bell's vireo, the Santa Ana Sucker, San Bernardino kangaroo rat, and the Santa Ana River woollystar. The upper portion of the watershed is in the San Bernardino National Forest, and the middle section crosses the Inland Empire, through the urbanized areas of San Bernardino and Riverside

counties. Throughout this region, the Santa Ana River is a wide, braided channel with flood control levees protecting the urban development. In some places, the river is a mile wide.

Near the western boundary of San Bernardino and Riverside counties, the river flows into the Prado Basin. The Prado Basin is a flood control basin, habitat area and a water treatment wetland. The Orange County Water District owns 2,150 acres in the basin, which is in Riverside County. It operates a treatment wetland to reduce nitrogen levels in the river water prior to using that water for groundwater recharge downstream. Prado Dam was built at a narrow point along the river, where the river flows between the Chino Hills and the Santa Ana Mountains. Below Prado Dam, through the Santa Ana Canyon, there is a short section of relatively natural riparian corridor, with natural channel bottom and riparian vegetation. Below this section, through most of Orange County, the Santa Ana River is a concrete-encased flood control channel that leads to the coast. The mouth of the Santa Ana River is between Huntington Beach and Newport Beach and is part of the 1,000-acre Orange Coast River Park.

**Grantee Qualifications:** The Riverside County Parks and Open Space District was created by the electorate in November 1990 and formed on January 29, 1991. The District is an independent agency governed by the Riverside County Board of Supervisors, which sits as the District's Board of Directors. The District has extensive experience with project planning and implementation, as it manages more than 44,000 acres, including 40 parks, reserves, historic and archeological sites, and 90 miles of regional trails.

The District has managed more than \$6,000,000 in grant funds from the Conservancy for design and construction of the Santa Ana River Trail and Parkway.

**Project History:** For more than 50 years, trail users and community leaders have sought to complete the Santa Ana River Trail and Parkway ("the Parkway") from the crest of the San Bernardino Mountains to the coast near Huntington Beach. Portions of the Parkway were designated a National Recreation Trail in November 1976. When completed, it will be one of the longest urban recreation and river parkways in the United States. The trail will be a multi-use trail, serving pedestrians, cyclists and equestrians. It will connect a completed section of the California Coastal Trail to inland communities. The trail will go from the beach, through urban areas of Orange County and Riverside County, to the San Bernardino National Forest wilderness areas. The completed trail will be about 100 miles long and will include 18 miles of dirt multi-use trail in the National Forest and about 82 miles of paved trail along the lower reaches of the river. The completed trail will connect three counties and 23 cities.

The Parkway and river trail will connect more than 50 parks, historic sites, picnic areas, education facilities, forests, wilderness areas, hiking and bicycling trails, campgrounds, nature preserves, and equestrian centers along the Santa Ana River. It is being designed to serve user groups with a wide range of interests and abilities ranging from casual pedestrian and family audiences to racing cyclists, commuters, equestrians, and hikers. The trail will be designed in compliance with the Americans with Disabilities Act.

In 1990, the Counties of San Bernardino, Riverside and Orange, along with 14 cities and various agencies came together to adopt the "Plan for the Santa Ana River Trail", which provided a road

map for completing the trail along its entirety. The over-arching goal of the plan was to provide a continuous, multi-use, trail system along the entire length of the Santa Ana River Corridor.

In May of 2005, with the support of the Wildlands Conservancy, a nonprofit organization, local elected officials and state legislators from the watershed met to explore the possibility of state support for the Parkway. In July of 2006, an MOU was signed and adopted by The Santa Ana River Trail and Parkway Partnership including the counties of Orange, Riverside, San Bernardino, the Santa Ana Watershed Project Authority and The Wildlands Conservancy.

One of the primary hurdles to completing the Parkway had been a lack of consistent funding for trail projects. The Conservancy approved a \$1,850,000 planning grant to Riverside County in December 2007. Since then, the members of the Partnership have worked cooperatively and coordinated efforts to complete the conceptual development and trail alignments for the uncompleted segments of the Parkway. Proposition 84 included a \$45-million-dollar allocation to the Coastal Conservancy for projects to “expand and improve” the Parkway.

The Santa Ana River Trail is nearly complete in Orange County and more than half-finished in Riverside County with approximately 12 miles left to complete. There are approximately 8 miles of trail to finish in San Bernardino County.

The Parkway will traverse the entire length of the Santa Ana River mainstem for one-half mile on either side of the river. The Santa Ana River Parkway and Open Space Plan was completed in May 2018. As part of the Santa Ana River Conservancy Program the plan addresses the resource and recreational goals of the Santa Ana River region including open space, trails, wildlife habitat, agricultural land protection, water quality protection, educational use, and public access. Completing the Santa Ana River Trail is the top priority of the plan. The proposed project will connect two completed segments of the trail establishing a 26-mile continuous stretch of Santa Ana River Trail, or just over one-quarter of the entire projected trail length.

## PROJECT FINANCING

|   |                     |
|---|---------------------|
| <b>Coastal Conservancy</b>                  | <b>\$2,965,000</b>  |
| Federal Highway Bridge Program Funds        | \$50,000,000        |
| California Senate Bill 132, Chapter 7       | \$6,322,000         |
| WRCOG Transportation Uniform Mitigation Fee | \$5,713,000         |
| <b>Project Total</b>                        | <b>\$65,000,000</b> |

The cost for the two trail access ramps and the multi-purpose segment of trail that crosses the bridge is \$2,965,000. The remainder of the budget is for the bridge construction. Staff expects to use funds appropriated to the Conservancy in fiscal years 2017-2018 and 2018-2019 from the Safe Drinking Water, Water Quality and Supply, Flood Control, River and Coastal Protection Bond Act of 2006 (Proposition 84, Public Resources Code section 75001, *et seq.*). Chapter 5 of Proposition 84 provides funding for the protection and restoration of rivers, their watersheds, and associated land, water and other natural resources, and 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.” (Pub. Res. Code section 75050(i)). Proposition 84 requires that at least \$10 million of the Parkway funds be spent in each of the three counties. Consistent with Proposition 84, the proposed project will improve the Parkway by creating two access ramps and a section of multi-prpuse trail connecting two completed sections of te Santa Ana River Trail. The proposed project was developed in partnership with the local governments developing of the Santa Ana River Trail and Parkway.

The other anticipated source of Conservancy funding for this project is the FY 2018/2019 appropriation from the General Fund specifically for the Santa Ana River Conservancy Program. The Budget Act of 2018, Senate Bill No. 840, Chapter 29, Section 3760-101-0001 (e) states that \$5 million shall be available for the Santa Ana River Conservancy Program.

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

The proposed project is consistent with Chapter 4.6 of Division 21 of the Public Resources Code, Sections 31170 et seq. 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 within one-half-mile on either side of the Santa Ana River or its tributaries (Section 31172(c)). The proposed project is located on the Santa Ana River in the City of Norco.

Section 31173 states that the Conservancy may 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, enhancement, and protection (Section 31173(a)).

It further states that the Conservancy may undertake projects for 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(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 within the Santa Ana River watershed. This project is identified as a priority project in the Plan. Further, the project is consistent with the Plan, as discussed below in the Consistency with Conservancy’s Project Selection Criteria & Guidelines section.

Section 31174(c) requires the Conservancy to “give priority to river-related projects that create expanded opportunities for recreation, greening, aesthetic improvement, and wildlife habitat along the corridor of the river”.

The proposed project will help achieve the goals of the Santa Ana River Conservancy Program by awarding a grant to the Riverside County Parks and Open Space District to provide recreational opportunities on the Santa Ana River Trail. The project is a priority because it is

river-related, and further will expand opportunities for recreation along the Santa Ana River without infringing on water quality, water supply and necessary flood control.

**CONSISTENCY WITH CONSERVANCY'S [2018-2022 STRATEGIC PLAN](#) GOAL(S) & OBJECTIVE(S):**

Consistent with **Goal 9, Objective B** of the Conservancy's 2018-2022 Strategic Plan, the proposed project will construct a new section of the Santa Ana River Trail.

Consistent with **Goal 16, Objective A** of the Conservancy's 2018-2022 Strategic Plan, the proposed project will benefit disadvantaged communities by providing recreational and educational opportunities for disadvantaged community members visiting the Santa Ana River Trail in the City of Norco.

**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.
3. **Promotion and implementation of state plans and policies:** The project supports and is consistent with the "Santa Ana River Parkway & Open Space Plan" (Coastal Conservancy, May 2018). The project supports Goals 1 through 7 of the Education, Recreation and Access Goals of the Plan regarding creating a continuous shared-use trail system along the length of the river, connections between the river corridor and surrounding communities, river-related outdoor activities, opportunities to experience and learn about the natural environment and the river's resources, open space access, and access for park-deficient and disadvantaged communities along the river corridor. Finally, the project is listed as a priority project within the Plan.
4. **Support of the public:** This project is supported by the 25 nongovernmental organizations and agencies that participated in the development of the Santa Ana River Parkway and Open Space Plan.
5. **Location:** The proposed project is in the City of Norco in Riverside County. The Hamner Avenue Bridge will be part of the Santa Ana River Trail within the Santa Ana River Parkway which is defined as lands within one-half-mile of the Santa Ana River and its tributaries.
6. **Need:** Construction of the Santa Ana River Trail across Hamner Avenue Bridge will not occur without Conservancy funding.
7. **Greater-than-local interest:** The Santa Ana River Trail and Parkway is a local, regional and state resource. The proposed project will connect two completed trail segments to

establish a 26-mile continuous portion of the trail and serve as an attraction for trail and parkway visitors.

8. **Sea level rise vulnerability:** The proposed project is located inland, beyond projected sea-level rise scenarios for the years 2050 and 2100 as determined by the Ocean Protection Council's Sea-Level Rise Guidance.

#### **Additional Criteria**

9. **Urgency:** Hamner Avenue Bridge design and engineering are complete and required permits have been secured. Construction is ready to proceed so grant funds for the trail are urgently needed now.
10. **Resolution of more than one issue:** Construction of access ramps and the segregated trail across the bridge will provide a critical link between two trail segments as well as provide safe crossing for pedestrians and bicyclists.
11. **Leverage:** See the "Project Financing" section above.
12. **Readiness:** The project design is complete, and construction is ready to begin.
13. **Realization of prior Conservancy goals:** See "Project History" above.
14. **Cooperation:** See "Project History" above.
15. **Minimization of greenhouse gas emissions:** Project design and construction methods include measures to avoid or minimize greenhouse gas emissions to the extent feasible and consistent with the project objectives.

#### **CEQA COMPLIANCE:**

The City of Norco, as lead agency under the California Environmental Quality Act (CEQA), prepared the the Hamner Avenue Bridge Replacement Project Initial Study and Proposed Mitigated Negative Declaration ("IS/MND"). On April 18, 2020, the city adopted the IS/MND and a Mitigation Monitoring and Reporting Plan (MMRP). The MMRP is Appendix C to Exhibit 3. The IS/MND analyzes the potentially significant impact from construction of the bridge, off-ramps and associated construction.

The whole project is described as: The proposed project would replace the existing two-lane Hamner Avenue Bridge with a new bridge. The new bridge would include three 12-foot lanes and a 4-foot shoulder in each direction (northbound and southbound) separated by a 4-foot curbed median, along with a 12-foot barrier separated multipurpose trail on the east side of the bridge. To the north and south of the bridge, Hamner Avenue would include three 12-foot lanes and a 4-foot shoulder in each direction along with a 5-foot sidewalk on the east side of the roadway. .... A trail ramp would be constructed at the northeast and southeast ends of the bridge to connect the planned Regional Santa Ana River Trail with the barrier-separated multipurpose trail on the new Hamner Avenue Bridge.

The IS/MND provides a detailed analysis of potential environmental impacts and proposed mitigation measures to address the possible impacts associated with the entire project, only part of which the Conservancy is funding. The potential adverse environmental impacts of the project resulting from the activities associated with the bridge construction, along with the mitigation measures are summarized below.

**Aesthetics:** The proposed project construction activities, staging, stockpiling, storage of construction materials, presence of construction equipment, and temporary traffic barricades will result in temporary construction impacts by altering the composition of the viewsheds throughout the project corridor. However, construction activities will be minor, temporary in duration, and governed by local, state, and federal regulations and standards designed to minimize their potential to affect adjacent sensitive uses in negative ways.

**Biological Resources:** The project will result in direct permanent impacts on Santa Ana sucker critical habitat from bridge construction. The project will also result in direct temporary impacts due to construction work areas and access.

Project construction also has the potential for indirect effects on Santa Ana sucker and its suitable habitat and critical habitat. These indirect impacts are expected to be greatly reduced with implementation of mitigation measures identified in the MMRP.

Santa Ana Sucker Mitigation: The following specific mitigation will be implemented:

- If water diversion/dewatering activities are necessary, an approved, qualified biologist will conduct a preliminary underwater survey of the affected area noting habitat and any Santa Ana sucker present prior to any water diversion. Water diversions will be conducted outside of the spawning season for Santa Ana sucker (February 15–July 31) to the greatest extent feasible. If the Santa Ana sucker is present, then a relocation program will be implemented by a qualified biologist and a brief report will be provided to the USFWS.
- An authorized biologist will be present on site during construction within and adjacent to critical habitat to ensure that avoidance and minimization measures are in place according to specifications and monitor construction within the vicinity of the Santa Ana sucker populations.
- An Avoidance Management Plan and mitigation strategy will be prepared for Santa Ana sucker in coordination with Riverside Corona Resource Conservation District.

The project will directly affect least Bell's vireo through permanent and temporary removal and disturbance of occupied Fremont Cottonwood Forest/Black Willow Thickets habitat. Due to funding schedule constraints, the project must be completed by January 2023, which puts the project on a tight schedule. Consequently, construction will take place across at least two nesting seasons and it may not be possible to avoid removing vegetation during the breeding season. Because least Bell's vireo nests occur within the project limits of disturbance and work is expected to occur during the spring and summer months, direct mortality of nestling least Bell's vireo during vegetation clearing and grubbing could potentially occur if active nests are within construction areas. Construction noise and lighting may also affect least Bell's vireo.

Bridge construction will result in permanent impacts to 0.26 acres of riparian habitat and temporary impacts to 4.33 acres of riparian habitat. Also, the project will cause temporary impacts to 0.49 acres of wetlands.

Avian Biological Resources Mitigation Measures:

- Every effort will be made to clear vegetation outside of the nesting season. In addition, avoidance, minimization, and mitigation measures have been incorporated into the project to minimize take of least Bell's vireo.
- Prior to clearing or construction, highly visible barriers (such as orange construction fencing) will be installed around all riparian habitats that will be avoided and are adjacent to the project limits of disturbance to designate ESAs to be preserved.
- Wildlife movement corridors will be maintained during bridge construction.
- A total of 2.89 acres of mitigation credits are required for the project to offset permanent and temporary habitat impacts.

**Greenhouse Gas Emissions:** Construction-period GHG emissions would result from material processing, on site construction equipment use, and traffic delays due to construction. These emissions would be generated at different levels throughout the construction phase.

GHG Mitigation Measures:

- Greenhouse gas emissions will be reduced through innovations in plans and specifications and through traffic management during construction phases.
- In addition, longer pavement lives, improved traffic management plans, and changes in materials, the GHG emissions produced during construction can be offset to some degree by longer intervals between maintenance and rehabilitation activities.

Land Use and Planning, Mineral Resources, Population and Housing, Public Services, Recreation, and Utilities and Service Systems also were analyzed and determined they will not be impacted by the project.

Cultural Resources, Paleontological Resources, Air Quality, Hazards and Hazardous Materials, Hydrology and Water Quality, and Noise were analyzed and are not anticipated to have significant impacts due to project construction. Measures to reduce impacts to less than significant are included should any arise.

Staff has independently evaluated the Hamner Avenue Bridge Replacement Project Initial Study with Mitigated Negative Declaration and Mitigation Monitoring and Reporting Program adopted by the City of Norco on April 18, 2019, and concurs that there is no substantial evidence that the proposed project will have a significant effect on the environment. Staff therefore recommends that the Conservancy find that the project as mitigated avoids, reduces or mitigates the possible significant environmental effects to a level of less-than-significant and that there is no substantial evidence that the project will have a significant effect on the environment as that term is defined by 14 Cal. Code Regs. §15382.

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