

COASTAL CONSERVANCY

Staff Recommendation
September 3, 2020

TIJUANA RIVER VALLEY COASTAL TRAIL RIVER CROSSING FEASIBILITY PROJECT

Project No. 20-027-01
Project Manager: Sam Jenniches

RECOMMENDED ACTION: Authorization to disburse up to \$346,000 to the County of San Diego to prepare a feasibility plan for a California Coastal Trail crossing of the Tijuana River in Tijuana River Valley Regional Park in San Diego County.

LOCATION: Tijuana River Valley, San Diego, County of San Diego

PROGRAM CATEGORY: Public Access

EXHIBITS

- Exhibit 1: [Project Maps](#)
Exhibit 2: [Project Photos](#)
Exhibit 3: [Project Letters](#)
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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 three hundred and forty six thousand dollars (\$346,000) to the County of San Diego ("the grantee") to prepare a feasibility plan for a California Coastal Trail crossing of the Tijuana River in Tijuana River Valley Regional Park in San Diego County."

Prior to commencement of the project, the grantee shall submit for the review and written approval of the Executive Officer of the Conservancy (Executive Officer) the following:

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. To the extent appropriate, the County of San Diego shall incorporate the guidelines of the Conservancy's 'Standards and Recommendations for Accessway Location and Development'."

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 31400-31410), regarding a system of public accessways.
2. The proposed project is consistent with the current Conservancy Project Selection Criteria and Guidelines."

PROJECT SUMMARY:

Staff recommends that the Conservancy authorize disbursement of up to \$346,000 to the County of San Diego (County) to prepare a feasibility plan for a California Coastal Trail crossing of the Tijuana River in Tijuana River Valley Regional Park (TRVRP) in San Diego County. The proposed project will determine the most feasible location for the development of a permanent, safe, and reliable California Coastal Trail (CCT) Tijuana River crossing within TRVRP.

There is currently no north-south connection for the CCT that provides year-round access for hikers, bikers, and equestrians through the Tijuana River Valley. There are several existing and maintained trails within the County's TRVRP that could provide this connection. However, because no permanent, safe, reliable, and multi-use crossing infrastructure exists, these connections cannot be utilized by all user groups year-round.

Approximately 2 miles of the CCT alignment lies within the County's TRVRP, which features an additional 20 miles of multi-use trails. These trails allow users to connect between the cities of Imperial Beach and San Diego, to the Tijuana National Estuarine Research Reserve, and to Border Field State Park. Due to this existing network of trails within TRVRP, there are multiple CCT alignments (potential routes) which utilize the existing trails within the park. Specifically, four alignments have been identified that would bring trail users south into the park from Imperial Beach, through the River Valley, and then west to Border Field State Park and the coast. All four of these alignments utilize existing trails; however, none of the alignments are currently accessible year-round for hikers, bikers, and equestrians due to existing conditions at each location. There are segments on each of the four identified alignments that would require a bridge or other crossing type in order to be considered a permanent, safe and reliable part of the CCT. The proposed project consists of a feasibility study that would analyze each of the four potential crossing locations to determine which crossing is most viable to create an uninterrupted CCT.

The grantee will perform a literature and database review to gather preliminary information on the potential project sites. Following this review, the grantee will conduct technical studies to obtain baseline data at each of the proposed locations. Anticipated technical studies include a geotechnical/soil analysis study, a hydrology/hydraulics analysis, and an opportunities and

constraints report which will analyze potential environmental impacts via a desktop analysis. These studies will inform the design elements needed to create a safe crossing at each location and the potential impacts of the draft design. Analysis of potential environmental impacts and design requirements for the crossings will be the primary factors to inform the most feasible crossing type and location.

The grantee will then develop preliminary designs, an engineer's cost estimate, and a conceptual grading plan as part of a preliminary engineering study, completing the feasibility study report. In addition, the grantee will conduct public outreach throughout the project, including one or more public stakeholder meetings.

Site Description: The proposed project would be within a 76-acre site comprised of two parcels (APNs 662-020-120-0 and 663-010-450-0) near the western boundary of TRVRP, just east of Border Field State Park, approximately 1.2 miles east of the ocean. The developed footprint of the project would occupy 17.4 acres of the 76-acre project area. Historically, this site was used for agricultural production. Since agricultural production was abandoned, riparian habitat, coastal scrub, and patches of nonnative invasive vegetation have developed. There are remnant patches of disturbed coastal sage scrub, disturbed mule fat scrub and disturbed southern willow scrub that provide habitat for numerous species. The majority of the habitat in the project area is considered disturbed habitat.

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 River National Estuarine Research Reserve (TRNERR) on the west. Though degraded by human activity, the Tijuana River 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. 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 features 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). The County of San Diego Department of Parks and Recreation (DPR), State Parks and the United States Fish and Wildlife Service are responsible for the management of habitat and access on the public lands of the Tijuana River Valley and Estuary.

Grantee Qualifications: DPR 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 projects within their parks system. The County has successfully managed grants from the Conservancy and other state agencies in the past, as described below.

Project History: In 2003, the Conservancy authorized a grant of \$1,000,000 to DPR to design and evaluate the environmental benefits and impacts of an integrated program of habitat restoration and public access improvements in the 1,800-acre TRVRP. The County used the Conservancy grant to complete the detailed planning needed to set the stage for fully restoring the valuable habitat. The County worked in close consultation with the parties involved in the MSCP, including the City of San Diego, 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.

Subsequently, the Conservancy authorized grants in May of 2012 and February of 2013, totaling \$1,950,000, for the construction of trails as part of the Tijuana River Valley Trail System. These trails were completed in 2015 and, along with other trail projects in the TRVRP, resulted in the completion of all valley bottom trails proposed in the TRVRP. In 2014, the Conservancy authorized a grant of \$100,000 to the County to develop a public use feasibility study for other potential visitor-serving uses and amenities not addressed in the 2003 TRVRP Trails and Habitat Enhancement Project Environmental Impact Report. In 2019, the Conservancy authorized a grant of up to \$1,890,363 to construct the Tijuana River Valley Regional Park Campground, an amenity identified by the 2014 feasibility study.

The proposed project has been a long-term priority of the Conservancy and the County of San Diego. The CCT has no safe and reliable access to the southern terminus of the trail in part because there is no permanent, multi-use trail crossing of the Tijuana River. Identifying and designing such a crossing was beyond the scope of the previous trail studies that the County conducted for the TRVRP. The County of San Diego has completed 22 miles of the Tijuana River Valley Trail System which partially overlaps with the CCT. San Diego County Parks and Recreation staff consulted with Conservancy staff beginning in 2019 and submitted an application for grant funding in Spring of 2020.

PROJECT FINANCING

Coastal Conservancy	\$346,000
Project Total	\$346,000

The expected source of funds for this project is the FY 2018/2019 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, to promote access to and the enjoyment of the coastal resources of the state pursuant to Division 21 as specified in section 75060(b) of the Public Resources Code. The project is undertaken consistent with Chapter 9 of the Conservancy's enabling statute, as discussed below.

CONSISTENCY WITH CONSERVANCY'S ENABLING LEGISLATION:

The proposed project is consistent with Chapter 9 of Division 21 of the Public Resources Code Sections 31400-31410, 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. The development of a CCT crossing over the Tijuana River, when completed, will provide non-vehicular access to the southern terminus of the CCT, including Border Field State Park, for all Californians and visitors to the southern San Diego region.

Section 31400.2 authorizes the Conservancy to provide up to the total cost of the initial development of a public accessway by any public agency, and the amount of funding provided by the Conservancy shall be determined by the total amount of funding available for coastal public accessway projects, the fiscal resources of the applicant, the urgency of the project relative to other eligible projects, and the application of factors prescribed by the Conservancy. Consistent with this section, the proposed amount of the Conservancy contribution was determined based on the total amount of funding available to the Conservancy for public access projects and the Conservancy's Project Selection Criteria, including project urgency (See Consistency with Conservancy's Project Selection Criteria & Guidelines).

Consistent with Section 31400.3, the project would aid the County in establishing a system of public coastal accessways. This feasibility project will plan for a Coastal Trail connection across the Tijuana River and allow for existing trails within TRVRP to connect reliably and safely to the North with the City of Imperial Beach, and beyond it to the Bayshore Bikeway, which serves as a segment of the regional and statewide California Coastal Trail.

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 CCT. The proposed project will be part of both the inland trail system and the CCT. DPR is a public agency that operates the TRVRP in which the CCT Tijuana River Crossing will be developed and is thus eligible for Conservancy assistance under this section.

CONSISTENCY WITH CONSERVANCY'S ACCESS PROGRAM STANDARDS:

Standard No. 1, Protect Public and Coastal Resources: The proposed project is a feasibility study that will help to identify a design and location to minimize alteration of the natural

landforms and to protect environmentally sensitive habitats by constructing access improvements around habitat areas.

Standard No. 2, Correct Hazards: The proposed project will identify the most feasible location to develop a safe and reliable multi-use crossing over the Tijuana River. Currently, the lack of a safe and reliable multi-use crossing is a frequent hazard.

Standard No. 5, Environmentally Sensitive Areas: The proposed project is designed to protect environmentally sensitive habitats by locating and constructing access improvements in disturbed habitat. Sensitive habitats on site will be incorporated into a Multi-Habitat Protection Area (MHPA).

Standard No. 8, Trails: The proposed project will involve a feasibility study to enable the construction of a river crossing that will connect two sections of the California Coastal Trail, as well as the regional trail system.

Standard No. 13, Barrier-Free Access: The proposed project will involve a feasibility study to enable the construction of a river crossing and will include ADA analysis.

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

Consistent with **Goal 1, Objective C** of the Conservancy's 2018-2022 Strategic Plan, the proposed project will design a new segment of the California Coastal Trail, consisting of a year round crossing of the Tijuana River that would connect two existing trail segments.

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:** Consistent with Completing the California Coastal Trail, the proposed project will directly address San Diego County Recommendations for Action #5: Design and construct a trail linking Border Field State Park with the San Ysidro community and the city of Imperial Beach. The proposed project will identify a feasible crossing of the Tijuana River which will provide a year-round trail connection through the TRVRP that will utilize existing trails within the Park that connect to trails at Border Field State Park and with the future alignment of the CCT through Imperial Beach and the San Ysidro community.

4. **Support of the public:** The project is supported by San Diego County District 1 Supervisor Greg Cox.
5. **Location:** The proposed project would be located within the coastal zone of the City of San Diego.
6. **Need:** Without funding from the Conservancy, the County of San Diego would continue to seek funding to complete the project. However, the project would be delayed.
7. **Greater-than-local interest:** The proposed project would address connectivity of the California Coastal Trail, a trail of local, regional, state and international interest.
8. **Sea level rise vulnerability:** The elevation of the site is anticipated to be above the 2050 and 2100 sea level rise predictions based on the Surging Seas Risk Zone Model. Most impacts from sea level rise will be experienced at the Tijuana River estuary, over one mile from the locations considered by the proposed project.

Additional Criteria

9. **Leverage:** See the “Project Financing” section above.
10. **Readiness:** The county is ready to commence work on the project with an expected project duration of approximately one year.
11. **Realization of prior Conservancy goals:** See “Project History” above.” The proposed project will also work towards completion of the California Coastal Trail.

CEQA COMPLIANCE:

The proposed project is statutorily exempt from California Environmental Quality Act (CEQA) pursuant to 14 California Code of Regulations Section 15262, because it involves only feasibility or planning studies for possible future actions which have not yet approved, adopted or funded. As required by Section 15262, planning for this project will include consideration of environmental factors. The proposed project is also categorically exempt from CEQA under 14 Cal. Code Regulation Section 15306 regarding information collection, because it consists of basic data collection to develop a bridge design which will not result in a serious or major disturbance to an environmental resource.

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