

COASTAL CONSERVANCY

Staff Recommendation  
February 3, 2022

**SANTA ANA RIVER  
OC RIVER WALK**

Project No. 21-071-01  
Project Manager: Rodrigo Garcia

**RECOMMENDED ACTION:** Authorization to disburse up to \$5,000,000 to the City of Anaheim to prepare preliminary plans, designs, permit applications, and environmental documentation for the “OC River Walk,” a project to improve and enhance a portion of the Santa Ana River in the County of Orange, including reconfiguring and vegetating the river bank and creating new trail connections.

**LOCATION:** Santa Ana River, Anaheim, Orange County

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EXHIBITS

- Exhibit 1: [Project Location Map](#)
  - 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 and findings.

Resolution:

The State Coastal Conservancy hereby authorizes a grant of an amount not to exceed five million dollars (\$5,000,000) to the City of Anaheim (“the grantee”) to prepare preliminary plans, designs, permit applications, and environmental documentation for the “OC River Walk,” a project to improve the ecological function of, and public access to and along, a portion of the Santa Ana River in the County of Orange.

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.

Findings:

Based on the accompanying staff recommendation and attached exhibits, the State Coastal Conservancy hereby finds that:

1. The proposed authorization is consistent with Chapter 4.6 of Division 21 of the Public Resources Code, regarding the Santa Ana River Conservancy Program.
2. The proposed project is consistent with the current Conservancy Project Selection Criteria and Guidelines.

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## **STAFF RECOMMENDATION**

### **PROJECT SUMMARY:**

Staff recommends the Conservancy authorize disbursement up to \$5,000,000 to the City of Anaheim ("City") to prepare preliminary plans, designs, permit applications, and environmental documentation for the "OC River Walk" on the Santa Ana River in the County of Orange.

The OC River Walk is a multi-partner and multi-benefit project to transform the Santa Ana River corridor in Anaheim. It seeks to re-establish the river corridor as a place of interconnectivity between people, local businesses, the nearby Angel Stadium, the Honda Center, and the Anaheim Regional Transportation Intermodal Center (ARTIC). The OC River Walk will improve recreation, aesthetics, and ecology of the river and adjacent land. It will also improve connectivity between transit opportunities at ARTIC, the Santa Ana River Trail and Anaheim Coves. Anaheim Coves is a 26-acre nature park located along the Santa Ana River between Ball Road and Frontera Street offering multi-use trails, educational amenities, native habitat, and fitness zones. The proposed OC River Walk will include improved public access to the river, enhanced habitat and ecological functions, carbon sequestration through tree planting, and increased water reliability.

The portion of the Santa Ana River corridor running through Anaheim, as it exists today, is a rock-lined trapezoidal channel for stormwater conveyance and water resource management. It protects the adjacent lands from flooding in large storm events, but it lacks engagement and integration with the community, and the ecological functions of a river. The area offers little to no shade for visitors to enjoy leisure time on the riverbank or walks along the river. The area is unsightly and uninviting to visitors looking for a break from the highly urbanized area of Anaheim.

In 2018, the Santa Ana Riverwalk Technical Assistance Panel examined opportunities to improve recreation and enhance the ecology of the river. The Technical Assistance Panel developed different alternatives for the transformation of the river corridor and recommended the City conduct a feasibility study based on their recommendations. In 2021, the City developed the OC River Walk Engineering Feasibility Study for the two-mile stretch of the river from Ball Road to

Orangewood Avenue. The Feasibility Study identified 17 unique opportunities to transform the Santa Ana River Corridor in Anaheim into a multi-benefit location for visitor and residents.

The elements identified in the Feasibility Study to transform the river corridor will benefit adjacent communities by creating additional amenities with access to open space, create art installations and recreational opportunities, restore habitat through planting trees and native plants, and recharge groundwater through water impoundment. These elements will be further designed, studied, and analyzed through the proposed project:

- Riverbank reconfiguration: Replacement of the existing riprap with a multi-purpose soil cement bank configuration that will allow safe access to the river and separate the existing Santa Ana River Trail from future improvements to avoid conflicts between uses. The embankment improvements will be adjacent to the proposed impoundment areas and will include tree planting and native drought-tolerant landscaping. Vegetation will consist of native trees, low lying shrubs, and grasses with special focus on vegetation that supports food, nesting habitat, cover, and migration corridors for native wildlife species. Trees will be planted in areas most adjacent to major roads and freeways to act as “filter forests” that can help sequester carbon from the traffic. These landscaping improvements will provide significant benefits including increased shade, carbon sequestration, improve air quality, and more comfortable conditions for recreation.
- River impoundments: Installation of two, temporary river water impoundment structures to create semi-permanent water bodies in the Santa Ana River. These impoundments will collect water from the Orange County Water District Groundwater Recharge System. During extreme weather events (either dry weather or heavy rain) or to meet periodic needs of the US Army Corps of Engineers and Orange County Flood Control District, the impoundment structures can be retracted. These impoundments will create an opportunity for safe public access to the river through non-motorized activities like kayaking or paddling.
- Trail extensions: Creation of a pedestrian, bicycle, and equestrian connection from the Santa Ana River Trail at Katella Avenue to Anaheim Coves, north of Ball Road, including access to existing trails and habitat connections for the thousands of residents adjacent to the Anaheim Coves.
- Non-motorized bridge: Construction of a dedicated, non-motorized bridge that will more safely connect pedestrians, bicycles, and equestrians to the Santa Ana River Trail. The bridge will connect both sides of the riverbank and allow pedestrians and bicyclists to avoid having to cross the river through Katella Ave.

For the proposed project, the City will prepare preliminary design documents, geotechnical reports, topographic surveys, and permit applications; conduct community outreach; design art installations for the four elements described above; and prepare all the documents needed for environmental review and analysis under the California Environmental Quality Act (CEQA) and the National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA). Following completion of the proposed project,

the City will work to secure funding for final construction documents, and the construction of the four elements described above.

**Site Description:** The project site is located within the Santa Ana River corridor between Ball Road to the north and Orangewood Avenue to the south. The 450-foot-wide by 9,000-foot-long site is adjacent to the Angel Stadium, ARTIC, and the Honda Center. The site is approximately 90 acres in total and stretches 1.6 miles along the Santa Ana River. This portion of the river was constructed in 1994 as a storm drain channel. The river and its banks are largely devoid of any vegetation or wildlife. The parcels located within the project area are owned and managed by multiple agencies including the City, the Orange County Flood Control District, the Orange County Transportation Authority, the Orange County Water District, the mixed-use development called ocV!BE, Caltrans, and the US Army Corps of Engineers. All impacted landowners have been engaged in the planning process and are supportive of the proposed project. The City is working with partners to complete a cooperative agreement regarding the design and engineering of these four elements.

**Grant Applicant Qualifications:** The City has extensive experience completing planning efforts of similar size and scope that involve multiple jurisdictions. The Parks Capital Project Section of the Community Services Department is responsible for park master planning, facility design, capital projects development, construction management, and long-range park policy planning, and will be the lead on this planning effort. Some of the successfully completed grant-funded parks projects include Paul Revere Park project (Land and Water Conservation Fund), Miraloma Park and Community Center (Prop 84 Statewide Parks), Burris Basin/Anaheim Coves (River Parkways), and Pelanconi Park (Habitat Conservation Fund).

**CONSISTENCY WITH CONSERVANCY'S PROJECT SELECTION CRITERIA:**

The proposed project is consistent with the Conservancy's Project Selection Criteria and Guidelines, last updated on September 23, 2021, in the following respects:

**Selection Criteria**

**1. Extent to which the project helps the Conservancy accomplish the objectives in the Strategic Plan.**

See the "Consistency with Conservancy's Strategic Plan" section below.

**2. Project is a good investment of state resources.**

The proposed project, when implemented in the future, will ensure the Santa Ana River continues to serve as the county's primary flood control infrastructure and replenish the Orange County groundwater aquifer while improving connectivity, recreation, aesthetics, and ecology of the river and adjacent land.

The proposed project is consistent with the following goals of the 2018 *Santa Ana River Parkway and Open Space Plan* prepared by the Conservancy:

- Goal 2 (Habit and Wildlife): Restore and enhance habitat where appropriate opportunities exist to create high value habitat that provides multiple benefits.
- Goal 3 (Education, Recreation, and Access): Provide a range of river-related opportunities for people to be active outdoors.
- Goal 7 (Education, Recreation, and Access): Provide safe access to the river in appropriate locations.
- Goal 1 (Implementation): Collaboratively design projects and programs to provide multiple benefits that support the water, wildlife and habitat, and recreation, education and access goals for the Santa Ana River Parkway.

**3. Project includes a serious effort to engage tribes. Examples of tribal engagement include good faith, documented efforts to work with tribes traditionally and culturally affiliated to the project area.**

Following Conservancy tribal consultation on the proposed project in November 2021, the Conservancy scheduled government-to-government consultations with interested tribal groups to discuss the project and learn about appropriate mitigation measures for the project.

In addition, the City is working closely with the Gabrieleno/Tongva Nation of the Greater Los Angeles Basin to help tell the story of the Santa Ana River through art and education installations.

**4. Project benefits will be sustainable or resilient over the project lifespan.**

While the project site is not at risk of sea level rise, the project design will be prepared for extreme weather and flood events that may impact the area as a result of climate change. The design will maintain original flood conveyance capacity and stormwater flood protection and allow for easy impoundment take-down and deployment. New plantings will also help to curb the heat island impact, exacerbated by rising temperatures.

The project will help to reduce greenhouse gas emissions by creating new and improved opportunities for active transportation. The trail extensions and new bridge will provide easier, safer and more direct access to a variety of destinations, including a multitude of transit options at ARTIC. Additionally, carbon sequestering trees and landscape will be planted along the project area.

**5. Project delivers multiple benefits and significant positive impact.**

The OC River Walk is an opportunity to transform this segment of the Santa Ana River from a utilitarian stormwater channel into a regional recreation attraction. Dry riverbeds will be replaced with a nearly year-round water body. Vegetation and scenic viewpoints will replace isolated concrete and shade-less riprap on the riverbanks. Bicyclists, pedestrians, and equestrians will be encouraged to visit through a new multi-modal bridge and through the connection to residences at the Anaheim Coves.

**6. Project planned with meaningful community engagement and broad community support.**

The proposed project is supported by United States Congressman Lou Correa, the Gabrielino/Tongva Nation, Orange County Public Works, Orange County Water District, City of Orange, Friends of Harbors, Beaches and Parks, Orange County Coastkeeper, and the Orange County Bicycle Coalition. (See Exhibit 3)

In addition, as part of the proposed project, the City will conduct extensive public outreach for community and resident input.

**PROJECT FINANCING**

|                            |                    |
|----------------------------|--------------------|
| <b>Coastal Conservancy</b> | <b>\$5,000,000</b> |
| <b>Project Total</b>       | <b>\$5,000,000</b> |

The anticipated source of Conservancy funding for this project is a fiscal year 2021-2022 appropriation to the Conservancy from the General Fund for the “Santa Ana River Conservancy Program.” This project is consistent with the goals of the Santa Ana River Conservancy program, as discussed in the Consistency with Conservancy’s Enabling Legislation section below.

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

The proposed project is consistent with the provisions of Chapter 4.6 of Division 21 of the Public Resources Code, Sections 31170 et seq. regarding the Santa Ana River Conservancy Program.

Section 31173 states that the Conservancy may undertake projects and award grants to public agencies to help achieve public access and recreational opportunities; restoration, enhancement and protection of wildlife habitat and species, and protection of water quality of waters of the Santa Ana River. The proposed project will complete the planning and design tasks that are necessary to enhance a portion of the Santa Ana River and expand trails and other recreational opportunities for visitors along the River.

Section 31174(c) provides that the Conservancy shall 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 complete the planning and design tasks necessary to enhance recreational opportunities and improve aesthetics and wildlife habitat on and along the river.

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

Consistent with **Goal 2, Objective E** of the Conservancy’s 2018-2022 Strategic Plan, the proposed project will design a new river parkway that connects inland populations to the coast.

Consistent with **Goal 9, Objective C** of the Conservancy’s 2018-2022 Strategic Plan, the proposed project will plan public access facilities within the Santa Ana River Parkway.

Consistent with **Goal 10, Objective B** of the Conservancy's 2018-2022 Strategic Plan, the proposed project will plan for the enhancement of natural habitats, scenic areas, and other open-space resources within the Santa Ana River watershed.

**CEQA COMPLIANCE:**

The proposed project is statutorily exempt from review under the California Environmental Quality Act (CEQA) under Title 14 California Code of Regulations (CCR) Section 15262, which exempts planning and feasibility studies for a project that has not yet been approved or funded. The proposed project only involves preparation of plans, designs, and environmental review documents for work that has not yet been funded.

The proposed project is also categorically exempt from CEQA under 14 CCR Section 15306, which exempts data collection, research, and resource evaluation activities that will not result in a serious or major disturbance to an environmental resource, including those as part of study leading to an action which a public agency has not yet approved or funded. The proposed project consists only of planning and environmental documentation activities to inform a future project that has not yet been approved or funded and will not result in a serious disturbance to environmental resources.

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