



COUNTY OF SAN DIEGO

LAND USE AGENDA ITEM

BOARD OF SUPERVISORS

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Fifth District

DATE: November 03, 2021

06

TO: Board of Supervisors

SUBJECT

ACHIEVING THE VISION OF THE SAN DIEGO RIVER PARK (DISTRICTS: ALL)

OVERVIEW

The San Diego River (SD River) stretches 52 miles, from the headwaters in the Cuyamaca Mountains near Julian to its mouth at the Pacific Ocean. The County Department of Parks and Recreation (DPR) is involved in regional efforts to preserve and enhance open space along the SD River and to create a contiguous trail that would provide residents and visitors an opportunity to connect with this unique resource. The County collaborates with the San Diego River Conservancy (Conservancy), which is a State agency established in 2002 to preserve, restore, and enhance the SD River and the surrounding area. The Conservancy's actions are overseen by a Governing Board that consists of 17 members from State and local organizations and includes Supervisor Joel Anderson representing the County of San Diego (County).

There have been numerous efforts to analyze and plan the future interconnected multiuse trail and recreational network that would be located alongside the SD River. The most recent planning effort, the SD River Recreational Trail Plan, was completed by the Conservancy in 2020. This planning effort determined that there are multiple gaps in the planned trail alignment, and that there is a need for other activities such as open space protection, habitat enhancement, and public outreach and education to ensure that the SD River remains an ecological asset for generations to come. The Conservancy's role is to encourage agencies like the County, as well as non-profits, to take on projects as funding is available.

Beginning in March 2021, the County Board of Supervisors (Board) convened a task force to identify priorities for future projects along the SD River and opportunities to implement those priorities. One of the issues identified by the task force was that there is no set funding source to acquire land, implement trails, and complete other projects along the SD River, or for ongoing operations and maintenance. DPR was a member of the task force and is supportive of the Conservancy's efforts. Specifically, the San Diego River Recreational Trail Plan supports the County's Trail Master Plan. DPR recognizes the importance of finding a secure funding source to continue to develop this area. Supporting these efforts will expand access to this valuable ecological asset to all residents. Today's actions would allow the County to take a lead role in preparing an analysis of potential funding options to secure this necessary long-term funding.

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Obtaining a funding solution is essential to completing the San Diego River Recreational Trail Plan, which supports the County's Master Trail Plan.

Today's action requests \$500,000 in funding for DPR to retain a consultant to study various long-term funding mechanisms that would fund priority projects along the SD River. The consultant will investigate various funding mechanisms and recommend funding strategies for the Board to implement and return in 270 days with options and a recommendation for Board consideration.

RECOMMENDATION(S)

CHIEF ADMINISTRATIVE OFFICER

1. Find that the proposed project is exempt from the California Environmental Quality Act (CEQA) pursuant to State CEQA Guidelines section 15060(c)(3) and 15378(b)(4).
2. Establish appropriations of \$500,000 in the Department of Parks and Recreation, Services & Supplies, to support the competitive solicitation efforts in assessing long-term funding mechanisms for the San Diego River Park, based on prior year available General Fund fund balance, and return to the Board within 270 days with options and a recommendation for Board consideration. **(4 VOTES)**

EQUITY IMPACT STATEMENT

The San Diego River (SD River) watershed is the most populous watershed in the region and is home to more than half-a-million residents. Public access is restricted to only certain stretches of the SD River that are owned by public agencies and non-profits who have completed environmental plans. This action works toward expanding access to this valuable ecological asset to all residents.

FISCAL IMPACT

Funds for this request are not included in the Fiscal Year 2021-22 Operational Plan in the Department of Parks and Recreation. If approved, this request will result in costs of \$500,000 in the Department of Parks and Recreation. The funding source will be prior year available General Fund fund balance. There will be no additional staff years.

BUSINESS IMPACT STATEMENT

N/A

ADVISORY BOARD STATEMENT

N/A

BACKGROUND

The San Diego River (SD River) stretches 52 miles, from the headwaters in the Cuyamaca Mountains to its mouth at the Pacific Ocean. The watershed is incredibly diverse, with numerous habitat types and endangered species, such as the arroyo toad and least Bell's vireo, supported throughout its entire length. Around 122,000 acres or 44 percent of the watershed remains undeveloped and 64,000 acres or 23 percent of the watershed is open space and park land.

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The SD River has a long history of being a regional resource with cultural importance. Prior to the 1800s, the SD River was an important resource to the Kumeyaay, who to this day maintain ancestral lands along the middle and upper reaches of the SD River. Since then, , dairy ranchers began converting the SD River into pastureland, impacting its flow and habitat. By the 1950s and 1960s, agricultural land and habitat gave way to commercial, residential, and industrial uses. Sand and gravel mining have extracted resources from the SD River. Most of the population and development is concentrated in the lower regions of the watershed, where most of the pollution impacts occur as well. Combined, these pressures have reduced habitat, compromised water quality, and led to other challenges.

The County Department of Parks and Recreation (DPR) is involved in regional efforts to preserve and enhance open space along the SD River and to create a contiguous trail that would provide residents and visitors an opportunity to connect with this unique resource. DPR has numerous parks within the watershed, including Mission Trails Regional Park, Lakeside Sports Park, Cactus Park, El Capitan Preserve, El Monte Park, Lindo Lake Park, Santa Ysabel East and West Preserve and the soon-to-be built Dianne Jacob Lakeside Equestrian Facility and Kumeyaay Valley County Park. The County is also building out nine regional trails, including two within the watershed, the Trans County Trail, and the San Diego River Trail.

Numerous organizations and statewide initiatives have recognized the importance of the preservation of the SD River. This included legislation from former State Senator Christine Kehoe, who established the San Diego River Conservancy (Conservancy) in 2002 (Assembly Bill 2156). The Conservancy is a branch of the California Natural Resource Agency. The Conservancy's mission is to preserve, restore and enhance the SD River and the surrounding area. The San Diego River Park Foundation is a nonprofit organization that has been active in establishing the San Diego River Park. In 2013, the City of San Diego established the San Diego River Park Master Plan, which outlines the vision and planning for the creation of a river-long park, stretching from the headwaters to the Pacific Ocean.

The Conservancy's actions are overseen by a Governing Board that consists of 17 members from State and local organizations and includes the City of San Diego, City of Santee, California Department of Fish and Wildlife, San Diego Regional Water Quality Control Board, and members appointed by the Governor. The County of San Diego Board of Supervisors (Board) is a member of the Conservancy, represented by Supervisor Joel Anderson. The County has an interest in completing the improvements of the SD River because it provides recreational amenities for the public, which supports the County's Master Trail Plan and preserves the SD River as a regional asset. The County can take a leadership role by exploring the development of an Enhanced Infrastructure Financing District or other funding mechanisms to provide an ongoing funding source to support the improvements needed throughout the SD River.

There have been past efforts to analyze and plan the future interconnected multimodal trail and recreational network that would be located alongside the SD River. These plans are periodically updated to account for changes in conditions from the previous iteration. The most recent planning effort, the San Diego River Recreational Trail Plan, was completed by the Conservancy in 2020. This planning effort determined that there are multiple gaps in the planned trail alignment, and that there is a need for other activities such as open space protection, habitat enhancement, and public

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outreach and education to ensure that the SD River remains an ecological asset for generations to come. Though plans are updated to address the current conditions, there is no dedicated funding source to implement the projects identified.

In 2021, the Board acquired land for the Kumeyaay Valley County Park and convened a task force to identify priorities for future projects along the SD River and opportunities to implement those priorities. The task force consisted of the County Board of Supervisors, the City of San Diego, the San Diego River Park Foundation, the San Diego River Conservancy, the Regional task force on the Homeless, and the Kumeyaay Diegueño Land Conservancy. One of the issues identified by the task force was that there is no set funding source to complete projects that improve the SD River, or for ongoing operations and maintenance. Today's actions would allow DPR to move forward with an analysis of potential funding options to secure this necessary long-term funding.

One long-term financing option to be considered is an Enhanced Infrastructure Financing District (EIFD). The EIFD law (beginning with Section 53398.50 of the California Gov't. Code) provides broad authority for local agencies to use tax increment to finance a wide variety of projects, including infrastructure, and parks and open space. An EIFD is established with the agreement of impacted and participating cities and counties and exists as a government entity with the sole purpose of financing public facilities or other projects as allowed under State law. An EIFD is governed by a Public Financing Authority, which is composed of members of the Board of Supervisors as well as City Council members of participating cities and at least two public members. Once an EIFD is established, its Public Financing Agency adopts and implements an Infrastructure Financing Plan, which details the types of facilities and development to be financed. Hiring a consultant would help determine how an EIFD could be implemented or if other funding options are available to support this work.

Today's action requests that the Chief Administrative Officer retain a consultant to study various long-term funding mechanisms that would fund priority projects along the SD River, including buildout of the River Park. The consultant will investigate various funding mechanisms and recommend funding strategies for the Board to implement and return in 270 days with options and a recommendation for Board consideration.

ENVIRONMENTAL STATEMENT

Today's action is exempt for the California Environmental Quality Act (CEQA) pursuant to Section 15060(c)(3) of the State CEQA Guidelines. Section 15060(c)(3) of the CEQA Guidelines provides that a project is exempt from CEQA review where "the activity is not a project as defined in Section 15378". The proposed action seeks to retain a consultant that would study various long-term funding mechanisms for projects along the San Diego River. The action is not a project as defined under CEQA Guidelines Section 15378(b)(4) because it involves government fiscal activities that do not involve any commitment to any specific project which may result in a potentially significant physical impact on the environment. Any future projects will be subject to further environmental review as necessary.

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LINKAGE TO THE COUNTY OF SAN DIEGO STRATEGIC PLAN

Today's proposed action supports the Operational Excellence initiative in the County of San Diego's 2021-2026 Strategic Plan, by identifying long-term funding options that could help achieve the vision of the San Diego River Park, increasing public access, addressing infrastructure challenges, and providing recreational opportunities.

Respectfully submitted,



SARAH E. AGHASSI
Deputy Chief Administrative Officer

ATTACHMENT(S)

N/A