

COASTAL CONSERVANCY

Staff Recommendation
April 23, 2026

**SANTA ANA RIVER
OC RIVER WALK – UPLAND HABITAT RESTORATION DESIGN PROJECT**

Project No. 26-004-01
Project Manager: Rodrigo Garcia

RECOMMENDED ACTION: Authorization to disburse up to \$1,472,000 to the City of Orange to undertake the OC River Walk – Upland Habitat Restoration Design Project, consisting of preparing design documents for a 7.3-acre habitat restoration and riverbank improvements project on the eastern bank of the Santa Ana River in Orange County.

LOCATION: Santa Ana River, City of Orange, Orange County

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 one million four hundred seventy-two thousand dollars (\$1,472,000) to the City of Orange (“the grantee”) to undertake the OC River Walk – Upland Habitat Restoration Project, consisting of preparing design documents for a 7.3-acre habitat restoration and riverbank improvements project on the eastern bank of the Santa Ana River in Orange 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.

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.

STAFF RECOMMENDATION

PROJECT SUMMARY:

Staff recommends the Conservancy authorize a \$1,472,000 grant to the City of Orange to undertake the OC River Walk – Upland Habitat Restoration Project, consisting of preparing design documents for a 7.3-acre habitat restoration and riverbank improvements project on the eastern bank of the Santa Ana River in Orange County.

The project will prepare plans to restore native upland habitat, improve riverbank access, and enhance flood control within an unused, bare area adjacent to the river and Santa Ana River Trail (SART). This effort is part of the larger OC River Walk initiative, which aims to transform a 1.7-mile stretch of the Santa Ana River corridor into a regional open space that connects communities to the natural resources of the river. The Conservancy funded the City of Anaheim to develop the OC River Walk Plan in 2022, and the proposed project will further the conceptual designs in that plan for the portion of the Santa Ana River within the City of Orange.

Currently, the project site suffers from severe ecological degradation and a lack of vegetation, bordered by asphalt parking lots and industrial facilities that intensify the urban heat island effect and contribute to polluted stormwater runoff. The Santa Ana River in the project area is entirely channelized, there is no vegetation along the river channel, and the public has no access to the river. The surrounding community has zero park acres within a half-mile radius and faces high pollution burdens, and limited recreational opportunities. Decades of urbanization and channelization of the river have eliminated much of the original upland habitat, threatening species such as the Least Bell's Vireo and Southwestern Willow Flycatcher.

The proposed plans will lay the groundwork for ecological restoration and community revitalization. Plans developed through the project will guide removal of invasive species along the banks of the river, establishment of native vegetation, and riverbank modifications that allow safe access to the water while maintaining flood protection. The design will improve this park area into a more inviting open-space that includes a segment of the SART, and create shaded rest areas, scenic overlooks, and gathering spaces, and reopen an adjacent 0.45-mile pedestrian trail. This short pedestrian trail is currently fenced off and will serve pedestrians who wish to stay off the main Santa Ana River Trail where bikes move faster. These improvements will reduce heat island effects, filter stormwater, restore habitat, and create a functional green space that promotes recreation, active transportation, and public health.

Community engagement will be central to the planning process. The City will collaborate with local stakeholders to ensure designs reflect community priorities for access, safety, and environmental stewardship. Public input will help shape features such as trail connections, rest areas, and interpretive elements, fostering a sense of ownership and long-term support for the project.

When complete, the design will deliver a plan for transforming a barren site into a natural landscape that protects biodiversity, improves water quality, and provides access to open space.

Site Description: The project site, owned by the Orange County Flood Control District, encompasses 7.3 acres along the east bank of the Santa Ana River within the City of Orange. The site includes an approximately 0.45-mile segment of the SART and a fenced-off former SART alignment. It is largely bare land with minimal vegetation with only a few mature trees remaining. Surrounding the site is a large asphalt parking lot and a petroleum storage facility to the east, Katella Avenue to the south, and a Southern Pacific railroad corridor to the north. Across the river is Anaheim’s Platinum Triangle District.

Grant Applicant Qualifications: The City of Orange has extensive experience designing and constructing projects of similar size and scope. The Public Works Department implements the goals and policies of the Natural Resources Element of the City’s General Plan, which covers natural resources, open space, parks and recreational facilities. The Public Works Engineering Division will oversee and manage the proposed project and collaborate with the Community Services Department to finalize landscaping designs.

CONSISTENCY WITH CONSERVANCY’S PROJECT SELECTION CRITERIA:

The proposed project is consistent with the Conservancy’s Project Selection Criteria, 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 will ensure the Santa Ana River continues to serve as a recreational destination consistent with the goals of the 2018 *Santa Ana River Parkway and Open Space Plan* prepared by the Conservancy:

- Goal 2 (Habitat and Wildlife): Restore and enhance habitat where appropriate opportunities exist to create high value habitat that provides multiple benefits.
- Goal 6 (Education, Recreation, and Access): Prioritize increased open space access for park-deficient and disadvantaged communities along the river corridor.

- Goal 7 (Education, Recreation, and Access): Provide safe access to the river in appropriate locations.

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

The proposed project will incorporate climate-resilient and sustainable design features, including planting drought-tolerant native species typical of upland habitats along the Santa Ana River. Trees will provide shade for SART users, reduce the heat island effect, and sequester carbon and filter air pollutants. Native shrubs and plants will create habitat for birds and other wildlife, slow stormwater runoff, and reduce pollutants entering the river and groundwater during extreme rain events. The site is approximately 15 miles from the ocean and faces no risk from sea level rise.

4. Project delivers multiple benefits and significant positive impact.

The project, upon construction, will preserve green space for recreational use and habitat conservation, will provide multiple benefits, including:

- Decrease air and water pollution.
- Reduce consumption of natural resources and energy through the installation of drought tolerant native plant species.
- Strengthen climate change resilience using nature-based strategies.
- Increase protection of biodiversity.
- Restore access to former pedestrian trail that is currently fenced-off.

PROJECT FINANCING

Coastal Conservancy	\$1,472,000
City of Orange	\$65,000
Project Total	\$1,537,000

The anticipated source of Conservancy funding for this project is from a fiscal year 2020-2021 appropriation to the Conservancy from the Safe Drinking Water, Water Quality and Supply, Flood Control, River, and Coastal Protection, and Outdoor Access for All Act of 2018 (Proposition 68, Public Resources Code Sections 75001-75130). Section 75050(i) allocates funds for projects that protect and restore rivers, and specifically allocates funds for projects that expand and improve the Santa Ana River Parkway.

The project is consistent with this funding source because it will design improvements that will transform a barren site into a natural landscape that protects biodiversity, improves water quality, and provides access to the Santa Ana River Parkway. The project is also consistent with the goals of the Santa Ana River Conservancy program, as discussed in the Consistency with the Conservancy’s Enabling Legislation section below.

Unless specifically identified as “Required Match,” the other sources of funding and in-kind contributions described above are estimates. The Conservancy does not typically require

matching funds or in-kind services, nor does it require documentation of expenditures from other funders or of in-kind services. Typical grant conditions require grantees to provide any funds needed to complete a project.

CONSISTENCY WITH CONSERVANCY'S ENABLING LEGISLATION:

The proposed project is consistent with Chapter 4.6 of Division 21 of the Public Resources Code, Sections 31170-31180, regarding the Santa Ana River Conservancy program.

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. Consistent with this section, the proposed project will design improvements that provide increased opportunities for recreation, greening, and habitat.

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. These goals include recreation opportunities, open space, trails, protection and maintenance of the quality of the waters in the Santa Ana River for all beneficial uses (Section 31173(a)). Santa Ana River Conservancy program goals also include public access to, enjoyment of, and enhancement of recreational experience of program lands. (Section 31173(b)). Consistent with these sections, the proposed project will design improvements to a park adjacent to the Santa Ana River for purposes of increasing public access, recreation opportunities, flood control and storm water filtration, and habitat restoration.

CONSISTENCY WITH CONSERVANCY'S [2023-2027 STRATEGIC PLAN](#):

Consistent with **Goal 1.1 Commit Funding to Benefit Systemically Excluded Communities**, the proposed project will improve environmental and recreational conditions within the community.

Consistent with **Goal 2.5 Recreation Facilities & Amenities**, the proposed project will enhance recreational amenities including paths, picnic areas, shade structures, water fountains, and signage.

Consistent with **Goal 3.2 Restore or Enhance Habitats**, the proposed project will restore habitat to protect biodiversity.

CEQA COMPLIANCE:

The proposed project is statutorily exempt from review under the California Environmental Quality Act (CEQA) pursuant to 14 California Code of Regulations, Section 15262, which exempts projects that involve only planning studies and feasibility analyses for possible future actions that have not yet been approved or funded. Consistent with this section, the project consists only of preparation of design documents that have not yet been approved for construction. The project is also categorically exempt under Section 15306, which exempts projects consisting of basic data collection and resource evaluation activities which do not

result in a major disturbance to an environmental resource. Consistent with this section, this project consists only of preparation of design documents that will evaluate the area for future action, and will not result in a major disturbance to environmental resources.

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