

DATE ISSUED: May 8, 2002

REPORT NO. 02-109

ATTENTION: Honorable Mayor and City Council  
Agenda of May 14, 2002

SUBJECT: Chollas Creek Enhancement Program and Chollas Creek South Branch - Phase I  
Implementation Program and Wetlands Management Plan adoption.  
Process 5.

### SUMMARY

Issue - Should the City Council adopt the Chollas Creek Enhancement Program and the

Chollas Creek

Manager's Recommendation - Recommend adoption of: 1) the Chollas Creek Enhancement Program; and 2) the Chollas Creek South Branch - Phase I Implementation Program and Wetlands Management Plan.

Planning Commission Recommendation - The item was noticed for April 11, 2002. However, the Planning Commission did not have a quorum to hear this item for action on April 11, nor on April 25, 2002. Because of the time constraint for the City's fulfillment of the Coastal Conservancy grant funding, the item is proceeding directly to City Council for a hearing without a Planning Commission recommendation.

Community Planning Group Recommendation - Southeastern San Diego Development Committee recommended approval on November 5, 2001, by a vote of 7-1-1 in favor. The Encanto Neighborhoods Community Planning Group recommended approval on November 19, 2001, by a vote of 11-0-1 in favor. The City Heights Area Planning Committee recommended approval on April 4, 2002, by a vote of 12-2-0 in favor. Eastern Area Planning Committee recommended approval on November 13, 2001, by a vote of 7-4-0 in favor.

Environmental Impact - Exempt from California Environmental Quality Act (CEQA) pursuant to State CEQA guidelines, Section 1506661 (b)(3). This determination is predicated on Section 15004 of the Guidelines which provides direction to lead agencies on the appropriate timing for environmental review. Projects identified at the conceptual level will be required to comply with applicable regulations of the San Diego Municipal Code and environmental review pursuant to CEQA prior to implementation.

Fiscal Impact - The City received Coastal Conservancy grant funding of \$95,000 for the planning program and an additional \$1.23 million for implementation of wetland restoration projects within the Chollas Creek South Branch - Phase I of the Chollas Creek Enhancement Program. City Council adoption of the Chollas Creek Enhancement Program and the Chollas Creek South Branch - Phase I Implementation Program and Wetlands Management Plan, will enable the California Coastal Conservancy to allocate

the \$1.23 million grant for the hiring of consultants to prepare, process and implement the Wetlands Restoration Project (Phase I). The Coastal Conservancy grant funding awarded to the City of San Diego and accepted by the City Council (by Resolution 291612 in 1999), requires that all planning, permitting (see Attachment 2), and implementation work, including construction, be completed by February 2004. Upon City Council adoption of the Enhancement Program and Phase I Implementation Program, Planning Department staff will process and bring to City Council for approval the necessary contracts to implement Phase I projects to be funded by the Coastal Conservancy.

Implementation of the future phases of the approximately 30-mile area covered by the Chollas Creek Enhancement Program will require future funding and grant requests for implementation over a 20-year period. The Chollas Creek Enhancement Program document identifies a cost estimate projection of \$42 million for implementation with recommended phasing and grant request programming over a 20-year period. The cost projection could vary substantially based on timing, inflation, more precise information on the scope of work, level to which private development may participate in the improvements and level of mitigation credit activity, among other variables.

Code Enforcement Impact - None with this action.

Housing Affordability Impact - The approval of the Chollas Creek Enhancement Program and the Chollas Creek South Branch - Phase I Implementation Program and Wetlands Management Plan will not directly affect housing affordability. Land in the floodway zone is undevelopable for habitable structures, pursuant to the Land Development Code. Therefore, no housing impacts are anticipated.

## BACKGROUND

Chollas Creek is a drainage system that traverses the Southeastern San Diego and Mid-City communities from La Mesa and Lemon Grove to the Barrio Logan/Harbor 101 community on San Diego Bay (see Attachment 1). Over the last 50 years, this natural drainage channel has been substantially modified and now consists of both earthen and concrete lined channels. Residential development, business complexes, roads and freeways have segmented the creek's geography to the extent that many open space features have been lost. The Creek's potential as an open space system and urban asset was only identified in the 1970's when work was initiated to update the first community plan prepared for the Southeastern San Diego Community. Since that time, restoration and enhancement of the creek has been the subject of numerous City policies and plans; specifically, the 1978 Barrio Logan/Harbor 101 Community Plan, the 1987 Southeastern San Diego Community Plan, the 1998 Mid-City Communities Plan, the 1984 Project First Class Design Program, the 1995 Imperial Avenue Corridor Southeastern Economic Development Corporation (SEDC) Urban Design Charrette, and the Southeastern San Diego Commercial Corridor Urban Design Guide (a poster), funded by SEDC in 1999.

These City Council-adopted community plans and policies provided the foundation for the Chollas Creek Community Workshop (1998), a forum that allowed community representatives and City agencies to work together to explore and identify major issues as well as develop a community "vision" for the ultimate development of Chollas Creek. The community plans'

policies, and the resultant "vision" identified at the workshop then became the basis of the Chollas Creek Enhancement Program document.

Concurrently, Assemblywoman Denise Ducheny expressed interest in the project and was instrumental in setting aside State funding for a grant issued to the City of San Diego from the California Coastal Conservancy for a total of \$1.325 million. This grant request was approved by the City Council on May 18, 1999, by Resolution 291612. Funding was to be used for: 1) up to \$95,000 for the creation of a planning document to guide implementation along Chollas Creek South Branch - Phase I area; and, 2) \$1.23 million for implementation of wetland restoration projects in the Phase I area. Other ancillary projects may also be funded with future Coastal Conservancy funds, provided they met the primary goal of implementing wetland restoration projects.

Upon receipt of the Coastal Conservancy grant, City Planning Department staff issued a Request for Proposal (RFP) to hire a consultant team to work with staff and prepare a Wetlands Management Plan for the Phase I area. The firm Estrada + KEA Partnership was selected. This consultant team prepared the Wetlands Management Plan which then became the basis for the Chollas Creek Enhancement Program and the Chollas Creek South Branch - Phase I Implementation Program and Wetlands Management Plan documents. The \$95,000 grant funding was used for the creation of these documents.

The \$1.23 million grant from the California Coastal Conservancy is for implementation of wetland restoration projects in the Phase I area. Staff has identified projects within the Phase I area that meet specific criteria to be used for a portion of this funding. To expeditiously implement these projects, staff will propose to retain a consultant team to act as project manager for the project: prepare schematic design, obtain all permits, prepare environmental review, construction bid packages, hire contractors and provide construction oversight.

The vision for the Chollas Creek area is multi-purpose. It includes concepts to: maintain and restore the natural habitat of undeveloped areas, restore channeled creeks in urbanized areas to more natural and safe conditions, promote cohesive new public and private development that integrates structures, create open space, and integrate the creek into successful and useable areas for the community.

Finally, the Chollas Creek Enhancement Program consolidates City Council's adopted community plan policies and studies to comprehensively and consistently address creek conditions and recommendations, through the inclusion of design/development guidelines to assist in realizing long-standing City policy.

## DISCUSSION

The documents recommended for adoption by the City Council include:

- 1) The Chollas Creek Enhancement Program, a creek-wide document, covering the 30-35 miles of creek area that extends from San Diego Bay in the Barrio Logan/Harbor 101 Community through the Southeastern San Diego and Mid-City communities, to the cities of La Mesa and Lemon Grove; and,

2) The Chollas Creek South Branch - Phase I Implementation Program and Wetlands Management Plan, a program for implementation with detailed information on creek condition and project proposals in the area along the South Branch of Chollas Creek, located between freeways SR-94 and the intersection of freeways I-15 and I-5.

The discussion that follows addresses: 1) the Chollas Creek Enhancement Program; 2) the Chollas Creek South Branch - Phase I Implementation Program and Wetlands Management Plan; 3) community input and 4) agency input.

### **The Chollas Creek Enhancement Program**

The Chollas Creek Enhancement Program builds upon long-standing City Council adopted policies to create a greater level of design guidance for future public and private development related to: wetland and upland restoration, channel reconstruction, trail systems and landscaping design, public art, an educational and interpretive program component, as well as long-term funding, implementation, and maintenance of the creek. The 1998 community workshop provided the "vision" for overall development, and the work of Estrada + KEA Partnership provided the technical background to address the revitalization of the creek and the restoration of its degraded habitat areas. Overall, the Enhancement Program calls for natural settings to be maintained by retaining natural features whenever possible; thereby promoting the preservation of an important linear open space resource in the midst of urban San Diego. This new linear open space will provide important linkages, habitat preservation, Wetland and habitat mitigation areas, and recreational focus to urban San Diego consistent with long established City policies and with the Strategic Framework Element and City of Villages concept.

The Enhancement Program's design/development guidelines as described below provide direction for the quality of physical development of public and private areas which are desirable to achieve a cohesive and qualitative whole, and preserve the linear open space concept that is strongly advocated in the City Council adopted policy and community plans.

Wetlands Restoration. Numerous opportunities for wetland restoration are identified. Wetland restoration guidelines have been developed to rehabilitate natural habitat areas containing sensitive plant and animal species, such as coastal sage scrub and the federally threatened California Gnatcatcher. The California Native Plant Society (CNPS) identifies several List 2 and List 4 species which could occur along portions of Chollas Creek with a more permanent water supply. Guidelines also provide for the restoration of habitat in areas that remain in their natural state, or can be brought back to their natural state.

Channel Reconstruction. Special treatments are suggested for the reconstruction of areas that have been concrete channelized. Reconstruction can be accomplished through an Arts Program to enhance the creek's natural and man-made environment, while maintaining its flood protective function.

Trail System Design. Guidelines for a comprehensive trail system will provide important continuity and accessibility throughout Chollas Creek. The trail system will encompass not only

the creek, but adjacent sidewalks, and open spaces that will ultimately link San Diego's central neighborhoods to San Diego Bay. The trail system is designed to be located adjacent to the creek whenever possible, and revert back to the public sidewalks whenever there is insufficient space along the creek.

Landscaping. A landscaping tree and shrub list is provided for the creek bed and adjacent areas, including plant selections that are typical of wetland creek and upland environments native to the San Diego area, and are drought-resistant. Landscaping design will contribute to the overall enhancement of Chollas Creek as a sculptural urban and park-like environment.

Public Art. The Enhancement Program includes public art opportunities that reflect the City's policy to promote artist involvement at the inception of projects. The program also identifies areas in need of artistic intervention in order to create high-quality man-made environments complimentary to the open space concept and the surrounding neighborhoods.

Educational Component. The creation of educational interpretive centers within Chollas Creek is identified as an important component of creek improvements. Centers should be constructed adjacent to and oriented toward the creek. Themes that could be developed include: cultural resources, prehistory, history, archaeology, paleontology, biology, botany, zoology, hydrology, habitat, and water quality restoration and enhancement. It is envisioned that interpretive signs will be located intermittently along the entire creek trail system. Signs should identify special natural features and cultural, historical, paleontological, and other resources. The program should be designed for auto-didactic learning and be incorporated into centers for learning, to facilitate classes and research.

Maintenance. The Enhancement Program anticipates long term maintenance of the creek and trail system. Long term maintenance fees are recommended to be determined at the time a project is submitted to the City for permitting. In addition to City services and private development responsibilities, the Enhancement Program recommends that community groups and local businesses become involved in the maintenance and enhancement program and adopt the creek as an urban asset, promoting the use of the creek and contributing to the maintenance and surveillance of the creek areas.

Implementation Phasing. The Enhancement Program outlines phasing (see Attachment 5), timing and funding requests necessary for long term implementation. The project is envisioned to be a 20-year effort at a cost projected to be approximately \$42 million in year 2000 dollars. Six phases of development are envisioned, all to be implemented based on their own development plan, using the Phase I approach as a model.

### **Chollas Creek South Branch - Phase I Implementation Program and Wetlands Management Plan**

The Chollas Creek South Branch - Phase I Implementation Program and Wetlands Management Plan document outlines proposed projects, located along South Chollas Creek, a 6-mile stretch of the creek, from freeways I-15 and I-5 to SR-94. Eight proposed project segments have been identified in this phase, each with a project description and an estimated cost. This stretch of the creek was chosen because it is highly urbanized with commercial, civic, and multi-family

development. Therefore, its improvement would greatly benefit the community. The Planning Department has issued a Request for Proposal (RFP) for wetlands restoration, landscaping, and construction of trails, and interpretive centers within this Phase I area. Contract negotiations are in process. The cost of implementing the projects will be funded by the \$1.23 million reimbursable grant from the California Coastal Conservancy. It is the departments intention to bring this contract to the City Council for approval once the contract is complete. Future implementation and wetlands management studies of subsequent phases will be conducted in a similar fashion pursuant to funding availability.

### **Community Input**

The community planning effort and input for the enhancement of Chollas Creek dates back to the late 1970's, during the update of the Southeastern San Diego Community Plan. At that time, policies were identified to preserve and enhance Chollas Creek. These policies were adopted as part of the 1987 Southeastern San Diego Community Plan. Subsequently, the 1998 update of the Mid-City Communities Plan also included policies for the restoration and enhancement of Chollas Creek as a natural open space system. The 1978 Barrio Logan/Harbor 101 Community Plan, which was prepared with the input of residents and industry within the planning area, also included development policies for Chollas Creek that call for its enhancement as an urban open space.

At the beginning of 1998, City staff held a community workshop. This workshop brought together a wide range of community members, inter-agency representatives and other interested parties who participated in defining a vision for Chollas Creek. This workshop effort resulted in a published report that chronicled the collective development issues, vision and an implementation strategy for the long term enhancement of Chollas Creek.

Planning Department staff published and distributed the proceedings of the workshop, and established an ongoing dialogue with affected community planning groups, individuals and agencies. Staff attended community meetings and made presentations to each affected community planning group, including: the Southeastern San Diego Development Committee, the Encanto Neighborhoods Community Planning Group, the City Heights Area Planning Committee and the Eastern Area Planning Committee. Discussions at the meetings were very positive and supportive of the project as a whole, including the selected implementation priorities. Some citizens were concerned that the City would not be able to deliver such a visionary plan or adequately maintain the improvements. Additionally, the City Heights meeting, the community specifically requested that the Fox Canyon be titled Fox Canyon/Auburn Branch. This will be done prior to final printing of the Enhancement Program. City Heights also requested that the follow up implementation program for their area involve extensive community input prior to its finalization.

### **Agency Input**

In 1998, during the initial stages of this project, Planning Department staff recognized the importance of having interdisciplinary technical support from numerous agencies involved in the development of Chollas Creek. For this purpose many departments and agencies were invited to participate in a Technical Committee. The Technical Committee met on a bimonthly basis

between January and August of 1998 (see Attachments 3 and 4). Since August 1998, Planning Department staff has maintained contact with individual agency representatives, and has distributed document drafts for review by all. Comments received have been incorporated into the documents now before the City Council. The Technical Committee is made up of technical staff from a wide variety of City Departments, and agencies covering a wide range of disciplines, including: Public Project Early Assistance, Urban Forestry, Police Department, Southeastern San Diego Economic Development Corporation (SEDC), Transportation, Storm Water Pollution Regulation, Open Space Maintenance, Park Facility Projects, Storm Drains and Street Sweeping, Bicycle Coordinator, Solid Waste Enforcement, Multiple Species Conservation Program (MSCP), Environmental Analysis, Engineering, Water Quality, Planning, Biology, Parks, Drainage and Flood Plain Management, Traffic Control, and Commission for Arts and Culture, among others. In addition, other public agencies have also been involved in the Technical Committee Team reviews including: San Diego Unified Port District, city of Lemon Grove, Environmental Health Coalition, U.S. Navy, U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, and U.S. Fish & Wildlife, among others.

Out of this team effort came additional interest in creek enhancements by agencies such as the Jacobs Foundation, SEDC and the Regional Water Quality Control Board. The Jacobs Foundation has implemented the Market Creek Plaza Project (approximately 335,000 square feet of retail, office and community space) where a large portion (Phase I -Segment 2B) of Chollas Creek is being enhanced, a trail developed and other creek-related amenities created, including an outdoor amphitheater. SEDC has implemented the Imperial Marketplace Project (approximately 243,327 square feet of retail space including a new Home Depot and ancillary commercial uses) in which a large portion of Chollas Creek was enhanced and a trail was developed (located along Phase I, Segment 6). The Regional Water Quality Control Board has taken the lead role in implementing a process to address water quality impairment in Chollas Creek. Planning Department staff has followed by submitting several grant applications, including a \$362,000 request for additional wetland restoration in Phase I and a \$700,000 request to implement the trail system in Phase I. The results of the grant requests are pending.

Park and Recreation Department staff has been involved throughout the creation of these documents and Planning staff has incorporated their comments into the draft documents, project selections and Wetlands Restoration Project. Equally, SEDC staff has provided comments to assist in the development of the Enhancement Program, Chollas Creek South Branch - Phase I Implementation Program and Wetlands Management Plan, and Wetlands Restoration Project consultant selection. SEDC's comment letters are included as Attachments 6 and 7 along with the City staff response to their letter (see Attachment 8). SEDC's comments focus on wetlands mitigation credit buffers and economic revitalization.

## CONCLUSION

The City Council adoption of the Chollas Creek Enhancement Program and the Chollas Creek South Branch - Phase I Implementation Program and Wetlands Management Plan will assist the City as well as the community in realizing the long-term goal of transforming Chollas Creek from a single purpose storm drainage channel into a multi-purpose storm drainage facility with urban trail and open space amenity to the central city communities through which it passes. Approval of these plans is critical to the City's ability to obtain the \$1.23 million California

Coastal Conservancy grant previously committed to the City in 1999. The implementation of this program will further serve to create an open space and trail system that will eventually connect the upper reaches of the creek to the bay. By means of a continuous multi-purpose open space green-belt with trails that will provide development direction and cohesiveness for public and private development. This will reduce pollution and traffic congestion, increase walkability within the neighborhoods, provide more usable open space and parks to the communities, assist in achieving the Strategic Framework's goals for creating more amenities in urban communities, and serve as a source of pride for these revitalizing neighborhoods. Implementation of the Chollas Creek Enhancement and South Chollas Creek (Phase I) Implementation Programs will be initiated with the hiring of a consultant/project manager for the Wetlands Restoration Project to construct selected improvements. The contract will require that the consultant hired manage the design development, permitting and construction of wetlands restoration areas, trails and educational interpretive center as specified in the Phase I Implementation Program document. Because of timing constraints for spending the reimbursable grant, the consultant contract will be presented for approval as soon as the contract negotiations are completed.

If the documents are adopted, the action will enable the California Coastal Conservancy to issue funds to the City for implementation.

#### ALTERNATIVE

Do not adopt the Chollas Creek Enhancement Program, or the Chollas Creek South Branch - Phase I Implementation Program and Wetlands Management Plan. This action would forego the Coastal Conservancy reimbursable grant for wetlands restoration of \$1.23 million. The alternative would not affect existing City Council adopted community plans and policies, nor the Land Development Code requirements, which could still be used for reviewing development activity within the area. However, this action would forfeit the grant funding for improvements and the ultimate cohesive development of Chollas Creek as an urban open space and green-belt through central San Diego.

Respectfully submitted,

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S. Gail Goldberg, AICP  
Planning Director

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Approved: P. Lamont Ewell  
Assistant City Manager

MCCULLOUGH/LEIRA/LHH

Note: Attachments 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, 9, and 10 are not available in electronic format. Copies of the attachments are available for review in the Office of the City Clerk.

- Attachments:
1. Chollas Creek area by Council District 3, 4, 7, and 8
  2. City Council Resolution 291612, adopted 1999
  3. Technical Committee Team List
  4. Technical Committee/Community Outreach Meeting Dates
  5. Enhancement Plan Phasing Map
  6. SEDC letter of support, dated April 24, 2002



7. SEDC comment letter, dated April 24, 2002, on final draft Chollas Creek Enhancement Program and Chollas Creek South Branch Phase I Implementation Program and Wetlands Management Plan
8. [City staff response letter to SEDC, May 2, 2002](#)
9. Chollas Creek Enhancement Program (available separately)
10. Chollas Creek South Branch - Phase I Implementation (available separately)