

DATE ISSUED: June 1, 2005 REPORT NO. 05-132

ATTENTION: Natural Resources & Culture Committee
Agenda of June 8, 2005

SUBJECT: City of San Diego, Draft San Diego River Park Master Plan

OWNER: City of San Diego

APPLICANT: City of San Diego Park and Recreation Department

SUMMARY

THIS IS AN INFORMATION ITEM ONLY. NO ACTION IS REQUIRED ON THE PART OF THE COMMITTEE OR THE CITY COUNCIL.

BACKGROUND

In the summer of 2001, Mayor Dick Murphy, with support of Councilmember Donna Frye, Council District 6, Councilmember Jim Madaffer, Council District 7, and Councilmember Wear, Council District 2, whose districts include the river, invited elected officials from local jurisdictions (County and City of Santee), the State and Federal governments and the San Diego River Park Foundation, to be members of a San Diego River Alliance.

That same year, a group of citizens concerned about the condition of the river and its surrounding environs, formed the San Diego River Park Foundation and the San Diego River Coalition (Coalition). The Foundation is a 501-C-3 non-profit and has a mission to support and empower community groups working to restore and enhance the river and to foster stewardship of this important community and regional asset in perpetuity. The Coalition is a group of citizens representing surrounding community and special interest groups with a mission to preserve and enhance the San Diego River watershed, and its natural, cultural, and recreational resources.

The Alliance, in concert with the San Diego River Park Foundation and the San Diego River Coalition, are working toward creating a San Diego River Park that addresses recreational opportunities, cultural resource protection, habitat conservation and restoration, improvement of the water quality, and development interface of the River from its headwaters to the ocean.

Recognizing the importance of the San Diego River as a resource, in 2002, with the assistance of Assemblymember Christine Kehoe and State Senator Dede Alpert, passed State Senate Bill 2156 establishing the San Diego River Conservancy, whose boundaries are the full length of the river and a half mile on either side.

In 2002 the San Diego River Park Conceptual Plan was developed by CALPOLY Pomona, Studio 606, a landscape architecture graduate program. The plan established four major goals. This plan was prepared for the San Diego River Park Foundation, sponsored by the California Coastal Conservancy and the Select Committee on Park & River Restoration, chaired by Assemblymember Christine Kehoe. Utilizing the San Diego River Park Conceptual Plan as a foundation, the Alliance recommended that local jurisdictions pursue individual River Park planning efforts.

The City of San Diego advertised a Request for Qualifications for a consultant to develop the San Diego River Park Master Plan for the San Diego River that would encompass the entire City's jurisdiction up to ½ mile on each side of the River. Statements of Qualifications were received from fifteen (15) consultant teams. Eight teams were interviewed. CIVITAS, Inc. consultant team was selected and an agreement was approved by San Diego City Council in August of 2003.

The Master Plan is being developed in three (3) phases.

1. Analysis and Findings
2. Options
3. Draft Final Master Plan

Each phase of the project has involved public input. As part of the Master Planning effort the consultant conducted three public workshops, and attended monthly Coalition meetings. Presentations were made to a number of interested community advisory and other groups, including:

1. Mission Trails Regional Park Citizens Advisory Committee
2. Wetlands Advisory Committee
3. Mission Trails Regional Park Task Force
4. Tierrasanta Community Council
5. C3
6. Mission Bay Park Committee
7. North Bay PAC Redevelopment District
8. Ocean Beach Planning Board
9. Mission Valley Unified Planning Organization
10. Linda Vista Planning Group
11. Navajo Community Planners
12. Old Town Community Planning Committee
13. Park and Recreation Board Design Review Committee
14. Park and Recreation Board
15. San Diego River Conservancy

On June 18, 2004 the Draft Master Plan was available to each of the above listed committees for their review and input.

DISCUSSION

During the San Diego River Park Conceptual Plan phase of the Master Plan, the CALPOLY Pomona Studio 606 design team, with input from the surrounding communities, developed four (4) major goals. These goals, along with the overall Conceptual Plan, were endorsed by the San Diego River Park Alliance. The four major goals are as follows:

1. To Preserve and Celebrate the San Diego River's Historic Resources
 - a. Develop partnerships with existing historical resources
 - b. Enhance preservation of historic and cultural resources
 - c. Facilitate education about the river's rich history
2. To Support the Natural Stream Processes of the San Diego River
 - a. Support sediment transport processes and manage erosion
 - b. Work toward decreasing flooding and increasing groundwater volumes
 - c. Improve water quality
 - d. Educate the public about how their actions impact the river environment
3. To Preserve and Enhance Native Riparian and Upland Habitat Throughout the San Diego River Park
 - a. Enhance native habitat
 - b. Maintain and improve habitat connectivity throughout the Park
 - c. Integrate recreation in such a way as to minimize impacts to sensitive species
 - d. Facilitate education about the river environment
4. To Provide Access to Recreation Activities Throughout the San Diego River Park
 - a. Connect existing recreational facilities
 - b. Provide a continuous trail along the length of the San Diego River
 - c. Provide additional recreational opportunities and improve trail connectivity from the region into the river park
 - d. Maintain and improve the natural aesthetics of the river corridor
 - e. Enhance educational opportunities along the river

Utilizing the accepted Conceptual Plan as a baseline, the CIVITAS consultant team developed seven principles. These principles are the guiding ideas that express the essential elements of the San Diego River Park Master Plan, describing the intent and role of the Park in the City and region.

Principles:

1. Clean-up and restore hydrologic function to the river.

Historically an ephemeral waterway, the river volume varied significantly from seasonal flooding to negligible flow. Human activities, such as impounding, flow diversion, mining, and flood control, have altered this pattern and created a channelized, perennial waterway. The San Diego River Park planning effort seeks to identify viable patterns appropriate to each area that will improve water quality,

sediment transport, and ground water recharge, while also expanding riparian habitat. The value of the river and the River Park is dependent on its water quality. The San Diego River Park effort emphasizes a need to protect and improve water quality through a variety of tools. If the water quality continues to deteriorate as it has in the lower reaches of the river, then the vision of a functional River Park will not be realized.

2. *Reclaim the valley as a Common.*

Today, the river valley is a forgotten place lost behind development. The San Diego River Park offers the chance to recover the river corridor as a place that all San Diego residents and visitors can come to enjoy the experience of nature. By aggregating open land, reclaiming an identifiable river corridor, and restoring the river's riparian integrity, the sense of the valley as a distinct place for people and for wildlife can be re-established.

3. *Unify fragmented lands.*

Significant natural open space remains in the San Diego region but it is largely disconnected. Lack of connectivity limits the land's ability to meet wildlife and human needs, in terms of essential habitat and recreational opportunities. The river corridor can become a major spine connecting these lands, both across the valley and along its length. These connections will also reinforce the visual and real sense of the valley by expanding native plant communities.

4. *Emphasize a continuum of experience.*

The valley offers an experience of a landscape that is diverse and changing from valley wall to valley wall and from the ocean to Mission Trails Regional Park. Protecting the distinctive character of each section of the valley must go hand in hand with creating a coherent San Diego River Park experience. Sensitive transitions between landscape types, between natural and urban, valley and upland, and river reach to river reach are the key to creating a sense of continuity throughout the San Diego River Park.

5. *Reveal the valley history.*

The valley has long been central to the settlement of the region, and its history tells a story of the people and the landscape of San Diego. The San Diego River Park Trail is an opportunity to link these historic and contemporary locations, stimulate public interest, and expand the public's knowledge of the prehistoric and historic land uses within the valley. Increased public interest will benefit these sites by instilling a sense of responsibility for their preservation and care.

6. *Reorient development toward the river.*

Today nearly all development within the valley turns its back to the river, deriving little benefit from this important resource. The San Diego River Park can serve as a catalyst for future re-use and inspire new development to seek ways to draw upon and enhance the river character, to create a 'front door' to the river. Working with property owners, the San Diego River Park can also promote a different way of thinking about new development and redevelopment, encouraging a 'river address' with architecture and landscape that draw upon and contribute to a river valley aesthetic.

7. *Create a synergy of people, water and wildlife.*

The San Diego River Park will serve a diverse set of needs; these needs will at times be in conflict. To succeed, we must find a balance that best serves the human, ecologic, hydrologic and economic demands in the valley. Taken together each of these interests create a stronger, multi-faceted system that is the river valley. The San Diego River Park must be designed for and welcome all of them.

In addition to the goals, the consultant team developed key recommendations. Where the principles define the essential goals and guiding ideas for the vision of the San Diego River Park, the recommendations describe the specific strategies for achieving the intent of the principles.

Five key recommendations were identified for the river as a complete system. Specific recommendations were identified for six areas or “reaches” of the river.

Key Recommendations:

Return the river to health. Improve the river pattern and water quality by separating stream flow from ponds and creating a wider riparian corridor with more meander. Remove invasive, non-native vegetation and plant a diversity of native species to re-establish a range of native plant communities.

Remember the big picture. Connect the valley to adjacent open space including the beaches, Tecolote, Bachman, Murray, Ruffin, Murphy and Alvarado Canyons and Mission Trails Regional Park to create an ecostructure of a unified native landscape by transforming rights-of-way and creating open space easements.

Build city wide connection. Establish a continuous trail system from ocean to mountain and canyon to canyon with frequent access to transit, canyons and neighborhoods. Coordinate with Community Plans, the San Diego Bicycle Master Plan and other current planning efforts to develop specific locations for neighborhood connections and route alignments.

Assemble a beautiful infrastructure. Integrate infrastructure (transportation, utilities, stormwater) and ecostructure (rivers, vegetation, wildlife corridors, habitat) into “beautiful infrastructure” making key ecological and infrastructure functions visible. Partner with public agencies to transform roads, bridges, the trolley, parking lots, culverts, channels and utility easements to be part of a unified landscape, maintaining and enhancing connections between adjacent natural habitats, residential communities, and the San Diego River Park.

Create a sequence of unique places and experiences. Establish a linked string of parks and open spaces by creating land that is accessible and usable by the public through acquisition of land, easements and partnerships with land owners in key locations. These open spaces will serve a variety of needs providing valuable protected habitat in some places and access to the river and connection to adjacent development in others. To achieve this it is important to collaborate with and support the Mission Valley Community Plan in particular to identify areas for redevelopment and new development with a river focus and to identify potential land to acquire for

parks and open space. As redevelopment occurs, land owners and developers should be engaged in the San Diego River Park planning process to support the creation of places that are mutually beneficial.

Over the last two years the consultant team has worked to develop a clear and concise set of goals and recommendations. At this point, while refining the master plan, a focus on examining options for implementation has begun.

Several options are available for incorporating the river park master plan into the City's policies and regulations. Unlike other City park master plans, the adoption and implementation of the master plan is complicated by the fact that most of the subject property is privately owned. The potential options identified to date, which can be combined, are to 1) adopt the master plan to be part of the Progress Guide and General Plan, 2) amend the affected community plans, park plans, and zoning code, and 3) apply an overlay zone. The following is a preliminary evaluation of the options. Further analysis is needed to determine the proper course of action.

The master plan could be adopted as part of the Progress Guide and General Plan, just as the Bicycle Master Plan was recently adopted. The potential problem with this course of action is that there are some conflicts with the applicable community plans, park master plans, and zoning. The fact that the river park master plan acknowledges that amendments to those plans are necessary to align these policy documents before some recommendations can be implemented may resolve these issues; particularly for long range projects for which there is time to amend the relevant community and park plans. In other cases where there is more detail in the master plan than in community or park plans, such as recommendations on the design or location of a pathway, this detail could be considered a further refinement of existing plan recommendations rather than a conflict.

In spite of the potential conflicts, adopting the master plan as a whole to be part of the General Plan has benefits. The various affected community plans, park plans, and zoning can then be amended as needed. Adopting the document as a whole ensures that it does not lose its continuity or otherwise become diluted in only writing relevant sections into the various documents, and it ensures the immediate implementation of the bulk of the document. Affected community plans include Linda Vista, Mission Valley, Navajo, Tierrasanta, and East Elliott; affected park master plans include Mission Bay Park Master Plan and Mission Trails Regional Park Master Plan; the Mission Valley Planned District zoning may also be affected.

An additional tool to implement the master plan is to enforce it with an overlay zone, just as the Mission Trails Design District surrounding Mission Trails Regional Park is enforced. In this case, the master plan could be adopted as guidelines for the overlay zone. The overlay zone would require most projects to obtain a discretionary permit and would require that the projects conform to the river park master plan. The overlay zone would provide a stronger enforcement tool and could help resolve differences between the river park plan and the underlying land use plans, park plans, and zoning. The boundaries of the overlay zone would need to be determined.

As the project is further refined, staff will continue to investigate the options and determine the best mechanism for implementation of the Master Plan.

CONCLUSION

The primary purpose for this item is to provide the Natural Resources & Culture Committee with an informational update on the status of the San Diego River Park Master Plan and to receive input and support for the overall plan direction. Staff is specifically requesting confirmation and/or input on the overall Master Plan goals. This input, along with the comments received from interested community advisory groups, will help shape the final Master Plan and implementation documents.

Respectfully submitted,

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Park and Recreation Director

Bruce Herring
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Note: The attachment is not available in electronic format. A copy for review is available in the Office of the City Clerk.

Attachment: Draft San Diego River Park Master Plan

