
City of Costa Mesa
**Santa Ana River Trail
Vision Study**



Used with the permission of the artist, Lauren Donner, and Friends of Harbors, Beaches and Parks.

April 15, 2008
Santa Ana River Trail Blue Ribbon Committee



About the Cover Image

The painting on the cover was prepared by a student at Estancia High School in Costa Mesa as part of a youth contest to envision community gateways to the Orange Coast River Park (OCRP). Lauren Donner received an honorable mention for her depiction of the OCRP theme, "seamless passageway". The contest was supported through a grant from Tom's of Maine in partnership with the Friends of Harbors, Beaches and Parks; Earth Resource Foundation; and the National Park Service.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The City of Costa Mesa's Santa Ana River Trail Blue Ribbon Committee was appointed by the Costa Mesa City Council on August 1, 2006. The committee recognizes the Council for their leadership and foresight:

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Eric Bever, Mayor Pro Tem
Linda Dixon, Council Member
Katrina Foley, Council Member
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A special thanks to Anne Dove of the National Park Service for her leadership and guidance as the Blue Ribbon Committee facilitator.

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“Restore and enhance the varied amenities within and the connections and access between the coastal bluffs, riparian lowlands, and wetlands to the Santa Ana River corridor as natural open space that provides recreation, reflection, and education opportunities for the benefit of residents and visitors of Costa Mesa.”

-Santa Ana River Trail Blue Ribbon Committee
City of Costa Mesa

Executive Summary

Background

On August 1, 2006, Costa Mesa City Council unanimously authorized the City to participate in the Santa Ana River Habitat and Recreational Planning Project and to accept a grant from The Wildlands Conservancy to support this effort as part of a broader regional movement to enhance and revitalize the Santa Ana River. Further, City Council appointed a “Blue Ribbon Committee” to create a vision document that addresses habitat restoration, passive recreational activities and trail links along the Santa Ana River through Costa Mesa. Nine other cities, including nearby Newport Beach and Huntington Beach, spanning three counties have undertaken similar processes to develop recommendations for their respective reaches of the Santa Ana River.

The Santa Ana River

The Santa Ana River begins in San Bernardino County, California in the San Bernardino National Forest. After traveling nearly 100 miles through San Bernardino, Riverside, and Orange Counties, the river eventually reaches its terminus where it flows into the Pacific Ocean between Newport Beach and Huntington Beach. The Santa Ana River still represents one of the largest river systems in Southern California despite much of it being channelized in recent times. The Santa Ana River’s watershed is the largest coastal river system in Southern California at 3000 square miles of mountains, foothills, and valleys. The watershed is home to more than 4.5 million people and contains four Resource Conservation Districts, the Orange County Water District, and several participating agencies. This watershed area spans portions of Los Angeles, Riverside, San Bernardino, and Orange Counties.

In Orange County, the Santa Ana River flows through or borders seven cities. The Santa Ana River is the westerly border of Costa Mesa for approximately 4.25 miles (*Figure 1: Location Map*). In Costa Mesa, land uses adjacent to the river include areas zoned for institutional and recreational uses; low- and medium-density residential neighborhoods; the County’s Talbert Nature Preserve; and a ½-mile Southern California Edison transmission corridor. There are existing and potential access areas along the River for members of our community and others to use locally and regionally.

Costa Mesa’s Santa Ana River Vision Study will further catalyze the opportunity for enjoyable experiences such as walking, running, horseback riding or cycling along the City’s stretch of the 100-mile Santa Ana River. Additionally, it will promote educational opportunities about the river corridor’s diverse habitats. These envisioned activities are consistent with the City’s General Plan, the goals of the Orange Coast River Park and the Fairview Park Master Plan. City Council adopted this Vision Study on April 15, 2008.



Figure 1: Location Map

The City of Costa Mesa is located in the coastal section of central Orange County. As of January 1, 2007, the city’s estimated population was 113,805 according to California State Department of Finance.

History of Costa Mesa and the Santa Ana River



Located on the “coastal tableland” above the Santa Ana River floodplain to the west and Newport Bay to the east, Costa Mesa is a suburban, largely middle-class city in Orange County, California. The population was 108,724 at the 2000 census. Since its incorporation in 1953, the city has grown from a semi-rural farming community of 16,840 to a suburban city with an economy based on retail, commerce and light manufacturing. While the City of Costa Mesa was incorporated less than 60 years ago, its history of human settlement extends far back into time.

A Brief History of the City of Costa Mesa

Well before the first Spaniards came to California, Native American Indians settled on the mesa above the Santa Ana River and Newport Bay. Members of the Tongva and Juaneño/Luiseño nations long inhabited the area that is now Costa Mesa and surrounding communities. Artifacts found in western Costa Mesa indicate that the area was the site of a village called Lukup by its residents.

Following the 1769 expedition of Gaspar de Portolá, which included the young soldier José Antonio Yorba, a Spanish expedition led by Father Junípero Serra named the area Vallejo de Santa Ana (Valley of Saint Anne). On November 1, 1776, Mission San Juan Capistrano became the area’s first permanent European settlement in Alta California, New Spain. Years later, in 1810, José Antonio Yorba and his nephew, Juan Pablo Peralta, received a land grant of 62,500 acres from the Spanish Empire. They named the area Rancho Santiago de Santa Ana. Yorba’s great rancho included the lands where the communities and cities of Olive, Orange, Villa Park, Santa Ana, Tustin, Costa Mesa and Newport Beach stand today. The area that is now Costa Mesa continued to be used as grazing grounds for cattle belonging to the Mission. Around 1820, missionaries built an adobe “Estancia” or way-station for the vaqueros who tended the herds.



Figure 2: Rancho boundary.
This map shows the “Abel Stearns ranches,” La Habra, Los Coyotes, San Juan Cajon, Las Bolsas, and La Bolsa Chica, which were located to the northwest of present day Costa Mesa. This map illustrates the Santa Ana River as a rancho boundary as well as the historic drainage of the river into adjacent wetlands to the north and south of the river’s present day outflow. Image: The Bancroft Library, University of California, Berkeley.

With the passing of the Mission Period and following Mexican independence, many of the Spanish land grants were divided and the area around the Estancia became the property and home of Don Diego Sepulveda (*Figure 2: Rancho Boundary*). This structure still stands today at 1900 Adams Avenue in the northwest section of Costa Mesa as an historic landmark which was recently restored by the City as a museum.

After the Mexican-American war, California became part of the United States and the era of the “Dons” passed. By 1880, American settlers had begun buying portions of the rancho from Yorba’s heirs. In the same decade, the town of Fairview was established near the modern intersection of Harbor Boulevard and Adams Avenue where a school house and church were built along with a 25-room hotel to accommodate visitors to the nearby hot sulfur springs. However, in early 1889, a storm washed out the railroad that served the community-bringing financial disaster to the community which soon reverted to a farming area.

In 1891, soon after the boom town of Fairview went “bust”, the Santa Ana and Newport Railroad begins service on tracks running down what is now Newport Boulevard. The little town of Harper, named after a nearby rancher, emerged on a siding of this railroad to the south of Fairview. Its first business, Ozmen’s General Store, stood on the corner of Newport and 18th Streets and contained the City’s first post office, established in 1909. On May 11, 1920, Harper officially changed its name to Costa Mesa, which means coastal tableland in Spanish, and continued as an agricultural community, growing sweet potatoes, corn, tomatoes, strawberries, and apples.

Building and oil drilling industries were just beginning to bring new growth to the City when the depression hit Southern California. Industries collapsed and the local bank closed. More disaster followed when the 1933 earthquake shook the town, damaging businesses and the Main School. But the school was soon rebuilt and continued in operation as the Clara McNally School. These buildings are now used for school administrative and service purposes.

World War II brought many thousands of people to the area for training at the Santa Ana Army Air Base, located on what is now the Orange County Fairgrounds, Orange Coast College, and the present site of the Costa Mesa Civic Center. When the war ended, many of these men and women returned with their families to begin the population boom which continues today. Costa Mesa’s population continued to surge after World War II, as many returned after the war with their families.

On June 29, 1953, the City was incorporated and a City Council-Manager form of government was chosen. The new City had an area of 3.5 square miles and a population of 16,840. Within 35 years, by 1988, the population had risen to 90,000 and the area to 17 square miles.

Today, Costa Mesa is a major commercial and industrial center of Orange County. As of January 1, 2007 the population has surged to 113,805 according to the State of California. The City, which in 1999 formally adopted the slogan “The City of the Arts”, is home to a regional symphony orchestra and the South Coast Repertory Theater. The 3,000-seat Orange County Performing Arts Center was completed in 1985. In 2006, both the 2,000-seat Renee and Henry Segerstrom Concert Hall and the 500-seat Samueli Theater held their grand openings.

Costa Mesa offers 26 parks, a municipal golf course, 26 public schools and 2 libraries. It is also home to the Orange County Fairgrounds, which hosts one of the largest fairs in

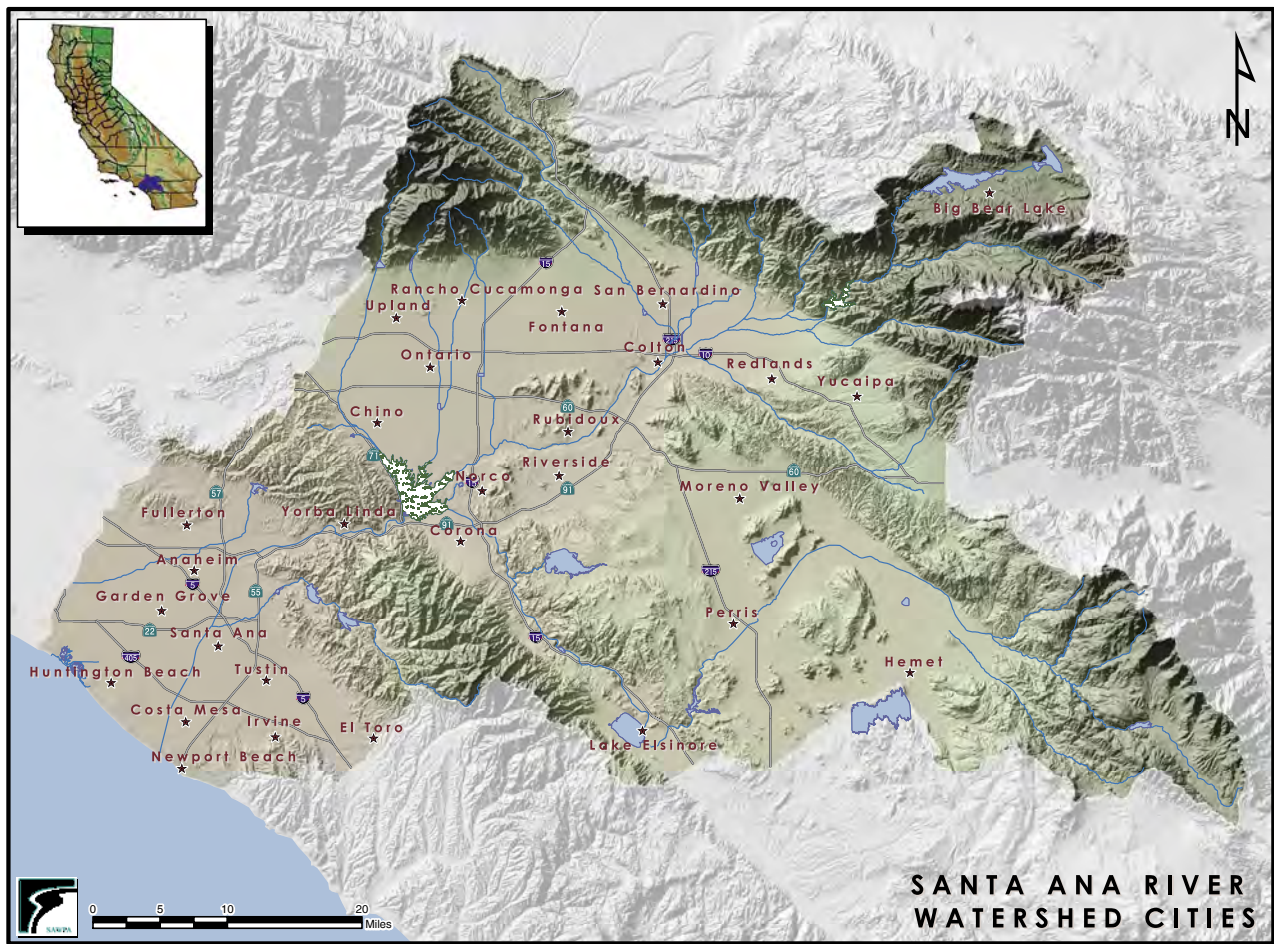


Figure 3: Santa Ana River watershed.

The Santa Ana River watershed, which includes all of the land that drains into the river and its tributary streams and creeks, is one of the largest river systems in Southern California, encompassing approximately 3000 square miles. Costa Mesa is located near the outflow of the watershed, where the river flows into the Pacific Ocean. Image: Santa Ana Watershed Project Authority (SAWPA).

California, the Orange County Fair, each July. The Fair receives more than one million visitors each year.

Costa Mesa is also home to the clothing manufacturer Volcom. Volcom was founded in 1991 and caters to the surfing, skateboarding, snowboarding markets, born out of the founders' own experiences with these sports. With assistance from Volcom and various grants, the City of Costa Mesa opened its first skate park in 2005 at Tewinkle Park.

Santa Ana River History

The portion of the Santa Ana River that extends through Orange County and Costa Mesa is part of a coastal plain through which the river would meander and shift course, often scouring the landscape during major rain events. Considering the river's watershed drains approximately 2800 square miles and drops over 11,000 feet in elevation, one can imagine the immense power of the river to shape the landscape at its lower reaches over hundreds of years (*Figure 3: Santa Ana River Watershed*). For comparison, the Mississippi River only drops 1,475 feet over 2,300 miles. The Santa Ana River's historic floodplain is visible from the toe of the bluffs of Fairview Park to the south extending northwest to Huntington Beach.



Figure 4: Lower Santa Ana River historic floodplain.

A major flood event in 1938 resulted in the Santa Ana River overflowing its banks. In this composite aerial photograph taken after this flood, the inundation area expands from the bluffs in western Costa Mesa to central Huntington Beach through what was historically the river's natural floodplain. While not the largest flood in recorded history of the Santa Ana River, the 'Great Flood of 1938' was the most destructive in Orange County's history, claiming 19 lives and leaving 2,000 homeless. An area 15 miles long and 7 miles wide between the bluffs of Costa Mesa and Huntington Beach was inundated. Image: Water Resources Institute, California State University San Bernardino.

From Fairview Park, the marshes and estuaries that once characterized the zone where the river meets the ocean are also visible (*Figure 4: Lower Santa Ana River Historic Floodplain*).

As the communities of Costa Mesa and surrounding areas evolved first into burgeoning agriculture-based communities and then into more developed, populated cities, the interface between human settlement and the dynamic Santa Ana River system was conflicted by successive floods (*Figure 5: Santa Ana River Flood, 1938*). In response to public concerns, various flood management projects were implemented over many years in an effort to stabilize the river through the construction of channels that would protect adjacent areas. While reducing the impacts of flood to communities, the alteration of the river systems natural dynamics had the side effect of creating ecosystem changes that reduced the historic wetlands and associated habitat.

In the 1970's, interest grew in seeing the levees of the Santa Ana River used for multiple purposes beyond their original use for flood protection. As a result, planning efforts began to transform the river corridor into a parkway that would include trails and associated enhancements that would ultimately enable users to walk, ride or bike from the ocean to the mountains at the headwaters of the Santa Ana River. In Orange County, the resulting Santa Ana River Trail was completed and in 1976, 15.7 miles of the trail were designated as the "Santa Ana River National Recreation Trail" and became part of the National Trail System.

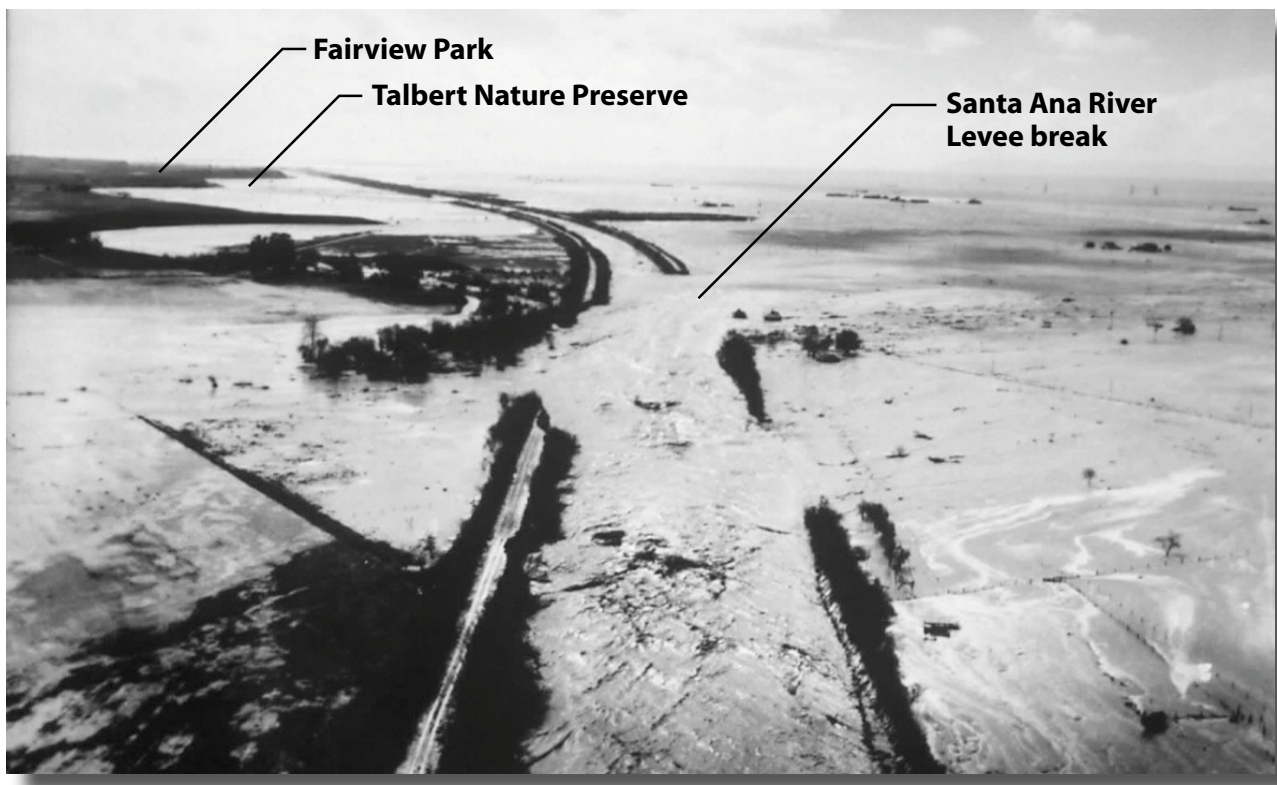


Figure 5: Santa Ana River flood, 1938.

This dramatic photo of the 1938 flood in Orange County is oriented downstream towards the Pacific Ocean and shows several breaches in the Santa Ana River levee near present day Gisler Avenue and Mesa Verde Golf Course. The water spread to the bluffs that are now Fairview Park in Costa Mesa in the left side of the image. It is easy to envision how this area was historically characterized by extensive wetlands. The area to the east of the river was historically known as “La Cienega de las Ranas” or “Lake of the Frogs” (Mitchell, 2006).

In the early 2000’s, a resurgence of interest in completing the remaining portions of the Santa Ana River Trail gained momentum. Now, with the leadership and support of The Wildlands Conservancy, many cities have undertaken visioning processes to create and/or reinvigorate their respective reaches of the river trail corridor. Concurrently, the cities of Costa Mesa, Huntington Beach and Newport Beach have been partnering with the County of Orange and a number of non-profit organizations such as the Friends of Harbors, Beaches and Parks to plan for the Orange Coast River Park, comprising over 1,000 acres of parks, wetlands and open space, including Costa Mesa’s Fairview Park, around the lower reach of the Santa Ana River.

This confluence of efforts for the Santa Ana River and the Orange Coast River Park resulted in the Costa Mesa City Council formally authorizing the City to participate in a “Santa Ana River Habitat and Recreational Planning Project” and to accept a grant from The Wildlands Conservancy to support this effort on August 1, 2006. To facilitate this effort, the City Council appointed a “Blue Ribbon Committee” to create a vision study to address habitat restoration, passive recreational activities and trail links along the Santa Ana River through Costa Mesa. This group met from January through March 2008 to develop this subject vision for Costa Mesa’s reach of the Santa Ana River. In addition to regular meetings, the Committee presented their draft vision to the City’s Parks and Recreation Commission. In response to public comments, two additional meetings, including one field trip, were held to resolve specific issues of concern.

Existing Conditions





Existing Conditions

The Santa Ana Watershed is the largest coastal river system in Southern California and is home to more than 4.5 million people. The flow of the Santa Ana River begins in the San Bernardino Mountains and discharges into the Pacific Ocean between Newport Beach and Huntington Beach. The coastal plain reach of the river traverses seven cities in Orange County.

Through Costa Mesa, the river marks the city's westerly border for approximately 4.25 miles before continuing to flow generally between Newport Beach to the east, and Huntington Beach to the west. Portions of the land to the east of the river are within unincorporated Orange County (*Figure 6: Jurisdictional Boundaries*).

Within the river corridor, Orange County Flood Control District has jurisdiction over the flood control corridors and the County of Orange manages the Santa Ana River Trail which is generally aligned along the river levees.

General Plan, Zoning and Land Use

Several types of land use adjoin the Santa Ana River. As noted, the Santa Ana River forms the westerly boundary of Costa Mesa in that area of the city, where a large portion of the properties are zoned and developed as institutional and recreational (I&R) uses, including Mesa Verde Golf Course, Fairview Park, and Vista Park which are designated as "Suburbia Parks I & II". The County's Talbert Nature Preserve is also zoned I&R and is included in this 4.25-mile stretch of the river corridor. Costa Mesa's Canyon Park is approximately ½ mile from the Santa Ana River. At the northernmost reach of the river corridor in Costa Mesa, a 115-foot wide strip of land ½-mile long is owned by Southern California Edison and industrially-zoned. The remaining properties along the 4.25-mile border are predominantly designated for low-density residential uses with some medium-density areas near Fairview Park. Residential areas adjacent to the river account for approximately 1-½ miles or 35% of the land uses along the Santa Ana River (*Figure 7: Costa Mesa General Plan Land Uses*).

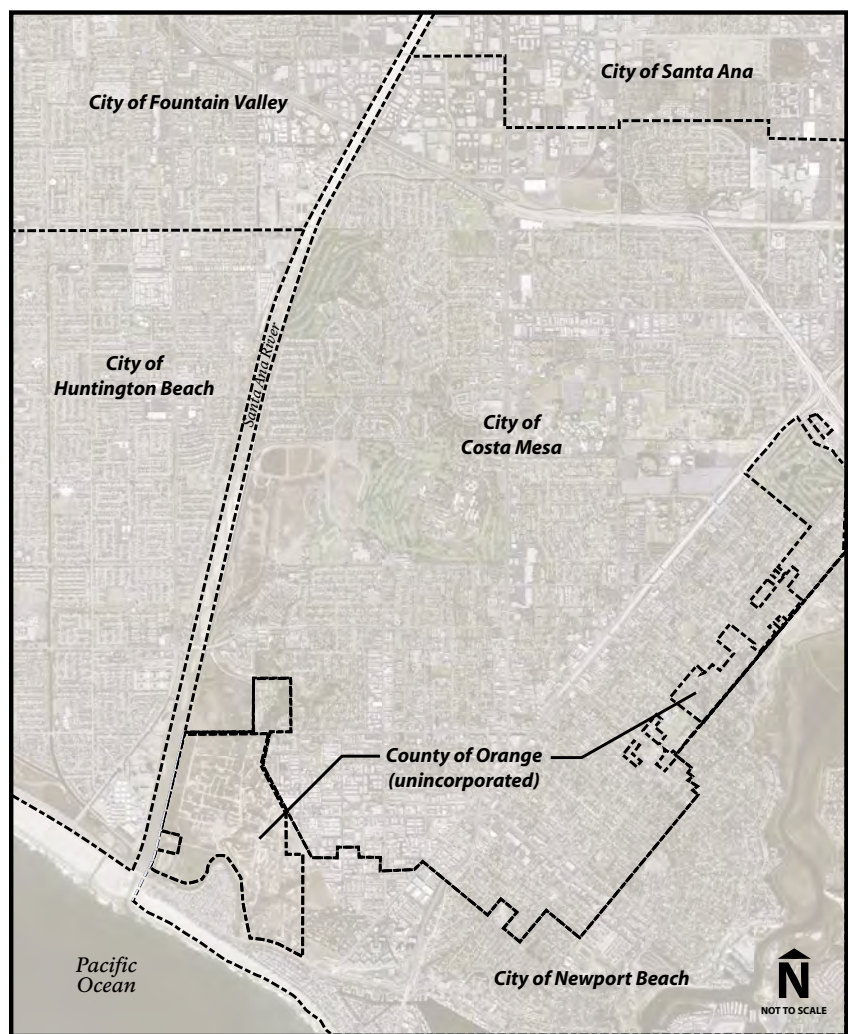


Figure 6: Jurisdictional boundaries.

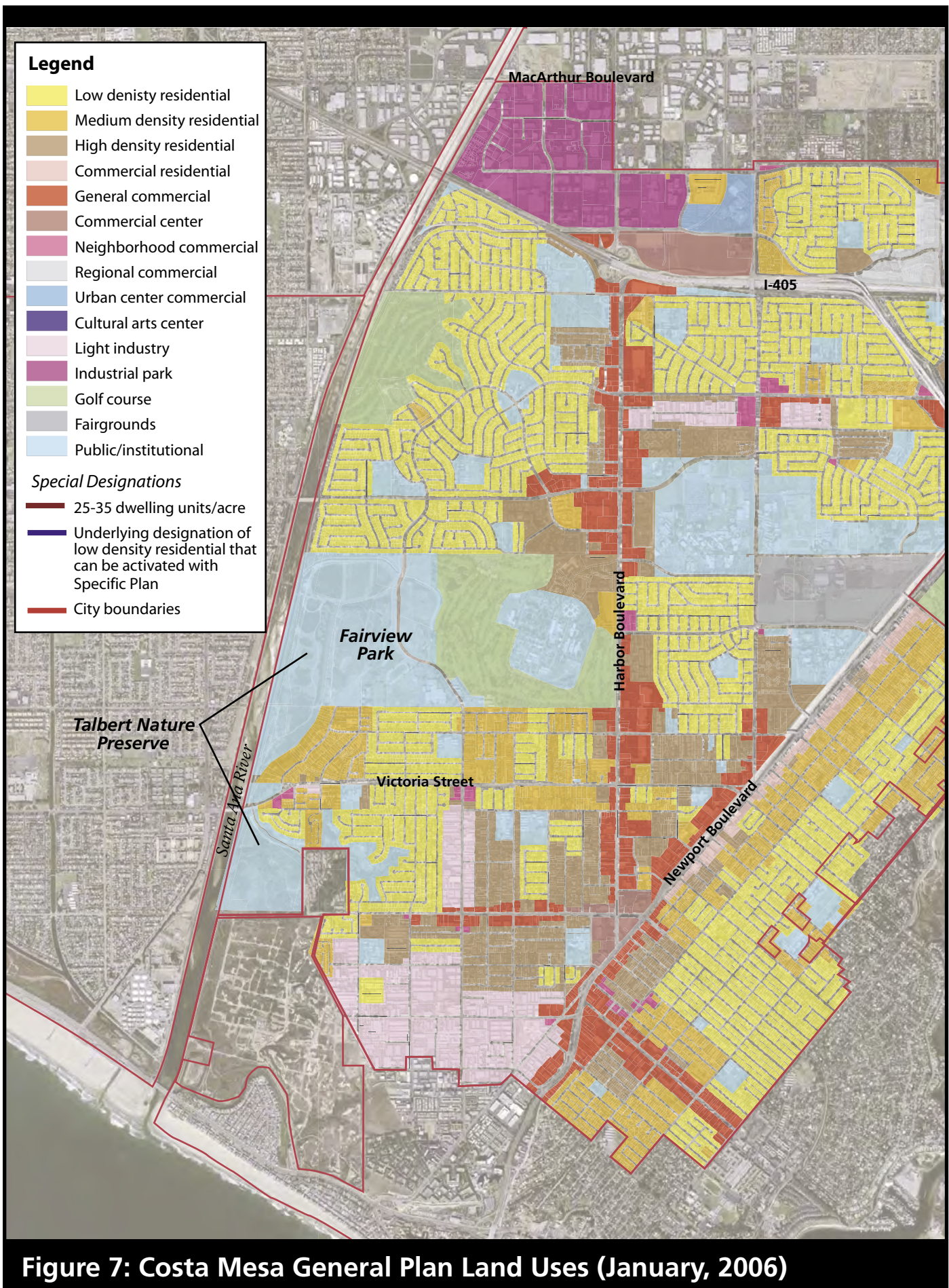


Figure 7: Costa Mesa General Plan Land Uses (January, 2006)

The “Open Space and Recreation Element” of the Costa Mesa 2000 *General Plan* outlines a strategy to preserve open space areas in the City and to meet the recreational needs of residents and is further articulated in the City’s *Open Space Master Plan of Parks and Recreation*.

Open Space, Parks and Recreation

Open space in Costa Mesa includes neighborhood and community parks, community centers, open space easements and golf courses. There are also County-owned regional facilities within and adjacent to the City limits and a large amount of institutional land. The total inventory of open space and recreation land comprises approximately 20 percent of the total land area of the City. Among the many cities that border the Santa Ana River, Costa Mesa is uniquely positioned to integrate the river corridor with the existing park and open space resources in the city because of the adjacency of existing open space, trails and parks to the river.

Open Space Master Plan of Parks and Recreation (Costa Mesa, 2002)

In preparing the Costa Mesa *Update of Open Space Master Plan of Parks and Recreation (Master Plan)*, a survey of Costa Mesa residents was undertaken to assess participation in fifteen recreation activities. The tested activities cited for being undertaken by the largest portion of Costa Mesa residents surveyed included: picnicking (47%); walking/jogging/running for recreation or exercise (46%); passive use of nature trails or open space (44%); bicycling (33%); and use of play equipment / tot lots (23%). The remaining activities tested were reportedly conducted by less than one of every four residents. These types of activities are consistent with the types of uses that would be appropriate along the Santa Ana River corridor.

The *Master Plan* also identified one of the top twelve priority recreation facility needs as, “... a Costa Mesa River-Bay Trail and Greenbelt linking east Costa Mesa and the Newport Back Bay with west Costa Mesa and Fairview Park through a series of open space, recreation, and institutional uses.” This trail would also link significant community recreation, institutional, and cultural facilities such as Fairview Park, Talbert Park, Estancia High School, Orange Coast College, the Fairgrounds, Costa Mesa High School, Davis School, TeWinkle Park, and others. Since the *Master Plan* was adopted, the City has been exploring the feasibility of several possible alignments for a trail to connect the Santa Ana River to the Upper Newport Bay.

The *Master Plan* also recommended completion of Fairview Park improvements, including trails and picnic elements, which is underway, as well as additional picnic elements at Marina View Park, Vista Park, and Fairview Park.

Fairview Park Master Plan (Costa Mesa, 2001)

Because of the scale and scope of Fairview Park, the City developed a separate *Fairview Park Master Plan (FPMP)* which emphasizes passive uses, a natural setting, and opportunities for walking, jogging, biking, and quiet contemplation. Additional compatible uses also include a model railroad; glider and kite flying; and a group picnic area. The more developed, landscaped portion of the park designates play areas for children and lawn areas for play and

picnicking, while the more natural areas of the park are to include large areas of restored native plant communities. The park will include a trail system for access by foot, bicycle and wheelchair, as well as park maintenance, emergency and security vehicles. While the park may include some more intensive uses, the overall policy direction for passive, natural preservation and restoration is to guide all detailed development decisions.

The City Council awarded a contract to Moffat and Nichol for the design of a water delivery system to treat dry weather flows and for the creation of approximately 35 acres of wetlands and riparian habitat along the Placentia Drain connecting to the Fairview Channel. The design process began in October 2005 and plans and specifications for construction will be completed in 2008. The design includes a complete topographic and biological survey of Fairview Park, which was completed in June 2007. With the completion of the park’s biological survey, staff has begun the process of updating the Fairview Park Master Plan. The updated plan will contain new maps, reports and timelines, and should be completed in February 2008.

Existing Park and Open Space Facilities

Along and within close proximity to the Santa Ana River in Costa Mesa are several parks and open space areas that form a network of resources associated with the Santa Ana River (Table 1: Parks, Recreation and Open Space Facilities Adjacent to the Santa Ana River; Figure 8: Santa Ana River Area Parks, Open Space, Trails & Bikeways in Costa Mesa).

Table 1: Parks, Recreation and Open Space Facilities Adjacent to the Santa Ana River								
Facility (listed north to south)	Managing Agency	Size (acres)	Amenities					
			Restrooms	Barbecues	Playgrounds	Shelters	Picnic tables	Drinking fountains
Moon Park	City of Costa Mesa	1.2	---	---	2	---	3	---
Suburbia Park	City of Costa Mesa	0.6	---	---	---	---	---	---
Mesa Verde Country Club	Privately-owned, closed to public	n/a	n/a	n/a	n/a	n/a	n/a	n/a
Fairview Park	City of Costa Mesa	208.0	1	---	---	1	7	3
Talbert Nature Preserve (northern portion)	County of Orange	91.5	1	---	---	---	14	1
Talbert Nature Preserve (southern portion)	County of Orange	88.5	---	---	---	---	---	---
Vista Park	City of Costa Mesa	6.0	1	1	1	---	6	1
Canyon Park (connected to river via south Talbert)	City of Costa Mesa	35.0	---	---	1	---	---	---
TOTAL		430.8	3	1	4	1	30	5
Sources: County of Orange (http://www.ocparks.com/Talbert/); City of Costa Mesa General Plan (2000); City of Costa Mesa Fairview Park Master Plan (2001).								

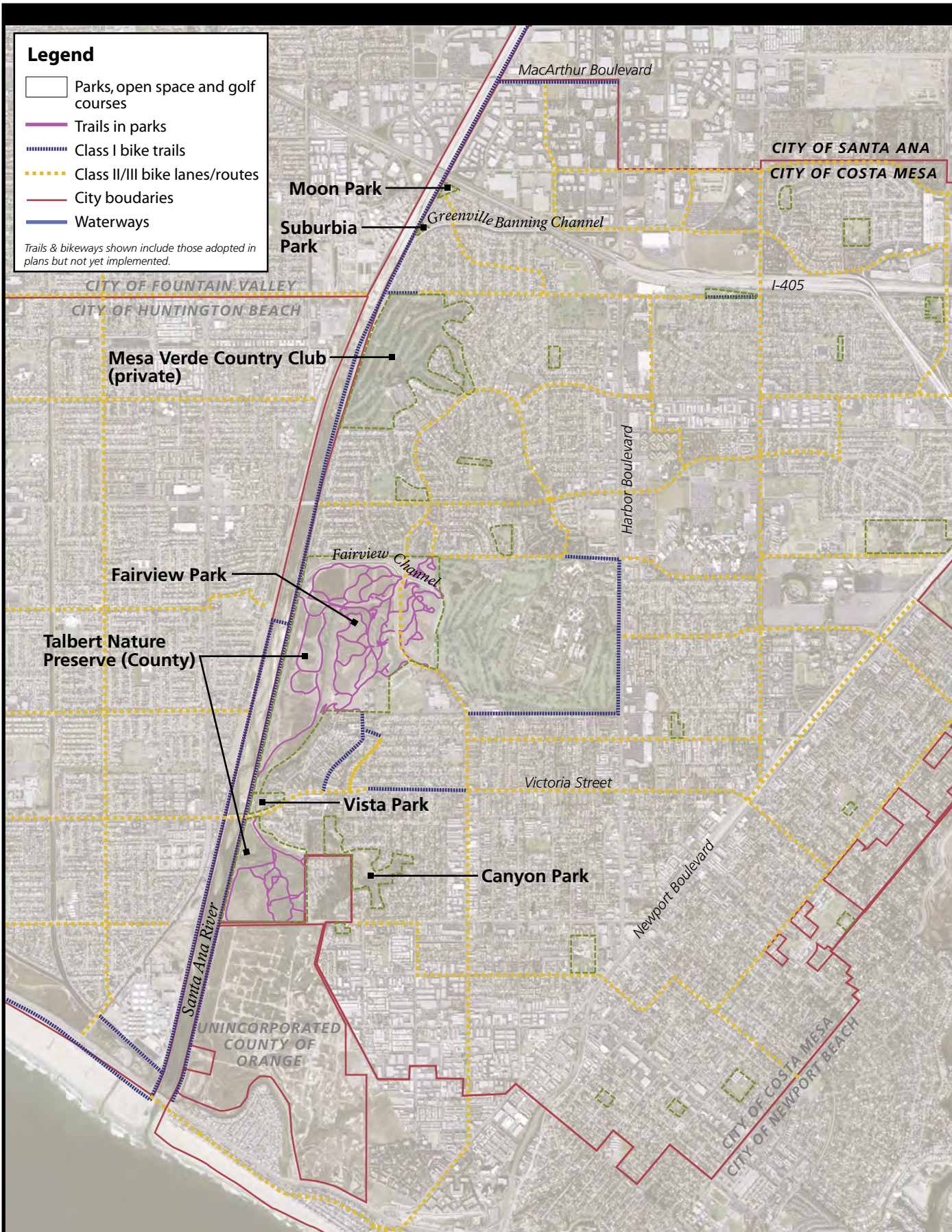


Figure 8: Santa Ana River Area Parks, Open Space, Trails & Bikeways in Costa Mesa

With the exception of the City’s Fairview Park, the County’s Talbert Nature Preserve, and the private Mesa Verde Country Club, all of the parks adjacent or connected to the Santa Ana River corridor in Costa Mesa are neighborhood parks with a service area within a ½-mile radius of each park. Fairview Park, as a larger facility, serves the whole community.

Contiguous with Fairview Park is the County of Orange’s northern Talbert Nature Preserve, within the City of Costa Mesa, which is developed as an upland grassland habitat with trails for hiking and equestrians and a small rest stop. The plans for the southern portion of Talbert Nature Preserve (currently unimproved and within the County’s unincorporated area) focus on habitat and wetland enhancement. An interpretive center is planned for future development and will emphasize educational programs related to both salt water and fresh water wetlands as well as the upland grassland habitat. Passive recreational uses, including a hiking and interpretive trail system, informal picnic area and trail rest stop make the Talbert Nature Preserve a complement to Fairview Park.

Trails and Bikeways

The City of Costa Mesa has an adopted Master Plan of Bikeways that identifies the regional Santa Ana River Trail as well as seven other local connecting bikeways. The Fairview Park Master Plan identifies two pedestrian trail connections that link to trails within Talbert Nature Preserve which then connect to the Santa Ana River Trail (*Figure 8: Santa Ana River Area Parks, Open Space, Trails & Bikeways in Costa Mesa*). The City of Costa Mesa has also been investigating the feasibility of east-west connecting trails between the Santa Ana River and Upper Newport Bay, which was a key priority identified in the City’s *Open Space Master Plan of Parks and Recreation*.

Schools

There are several schools less than a mile from the Santa Ana River which provide opportunities for outdoor educational programs as well as non-motorized transportation for students (*Table 2: Costa Mesa Schools Near the Santa Ana River Corridor*).

Table 2: Schools Near the Santa Ana River Corridor*		
School	Number of Students	Distance from Santa Ana River Corridor (miles)
California Elementary School	380	3/4
TeWinkle Intermediate School	1104	3/4
Adams Elementary School	545	3/4
Estancia High School	1291	Adjacent
Waldorf School (private)	300	Adjacent
Wilson Elementary School	617	1/2
Victoria Elementary School	355	1/2

**Santa Ana River corridor was defined as the river itself as well as adjoining open space and parks.
Sources: Google Earth; Newport Mesa Unified School District; Waldorf School of Orange County.*

Related Planning Efforts

In the past five years there has been a great deal of community, organizational and political momentum surrounding Santa Ana River improvement. As a result, there are several planning efforts underway that relate to the Santa Ana River and that affect the river's reach through Costa Mesa. The following is a summary of these efforts organized by scale from the broadest in geographic scope to more locally-focused.

Integrated Regional Water Management Plan (IRWMP)-Santa Ana Watershed Project Authority (SAWPA)

The IRWMP will focus on water resources with development of new water supply, drought protection, and water reliability as the primary watershed-wide goals. Existing and new projects will be identified to meet these goals, but will also include integrating multi-benefit projects in such areas as wetlands, flood control, storm runoff, environmental habitat, non-native species removal, and recreation trails.

Santa Ana River Trail and Parkway Collaborative Partnership

A partnership between San Bernardino, Riverside and Orange Counties was developed in 2006 along with SAWPA, The Wildlands Conservancy, cities and other organizations to facilitate completion of the approximately 100-mile Santa Ana River Trail and Parkway. Working together, the Policy Advisory Committee of the partnership was able to earmark \$45 million out of voter-approved Proposition 84 for the Santa Ana River Trail and Parkway. The missing links of the Santa Ana Trail and Parkway are scheduled to be completed by 2012.

Santa Ana River Parkway Feasibility and Planning Study-County of Orange

The County of Orange is conducting a study to meet the objectives of improving aesthetics; increasing native habitat; enhancing and adding to the recreational features; improving trails and bikeways along and connecting to the river; enhancing communities adjacent to the river; and coordinating the study with agencies and cities that have interest in the river. The study is scheduled to be completed in mid-2008.

Orange Coast River Park-Friends of Harbors, Beaches and Parks (FHBP)

The Orange Coast River Park (OCRP) consists of 1000 contiguous acres of park, wetlands and nature preserve at the mouth of the Santa Ana River (*Figure 9: Orange Coast River Park*). The park is an effort to link more than ten different contiguous sites together into a single landscape spanning the lower reach of the river. Thus, portions of the park would lie within the cities of Costa Mesa, Newport Beach, and Huntington Beach, and under the jurisdiction of county, state and federal governments. The OCRP encompasses existing parks and open space areas including Fairview Park (City of Costa Mesa), Talbert Nature Preserve (County of Orange), LeBard Park (City of Huntington Beach), Huntington Beach Wetlands (Huntington Beach Wetlands Conservancy), the US Army Corps of Engineers' wetlands, and other adjacent areas. The park would also incorporate properties that are now privately owned but could be included in the park when purchased with available state and federal funds. FHBP has been facilitating a partnership between the agencies, non-profit organizations and private landowners to plan for the future of the OCRP. A memorandum of agreement to further these efforts has been adopted by the Cities of Costa Mesa, Huntington Beach and Newport Beach. Adoption by the County of Orange is forthcoming.



Figure 9: Orange Coast River Park

Key Issues

In order to understand and identify the key issues affecting the Santa Ana River through Costa Mesa, the Committee reviewed background documents and maps and then undertook a field trip, walking the entire length of the river through Costa Mesa on a Saturday morning. The following are key issues that were identified by the Committee that are more general in nature, affecting most of the river through Costa Mesa:



Figure 10: Informal trails along levee.



Figure 11: Locked gates at pedestrian trail entrance.



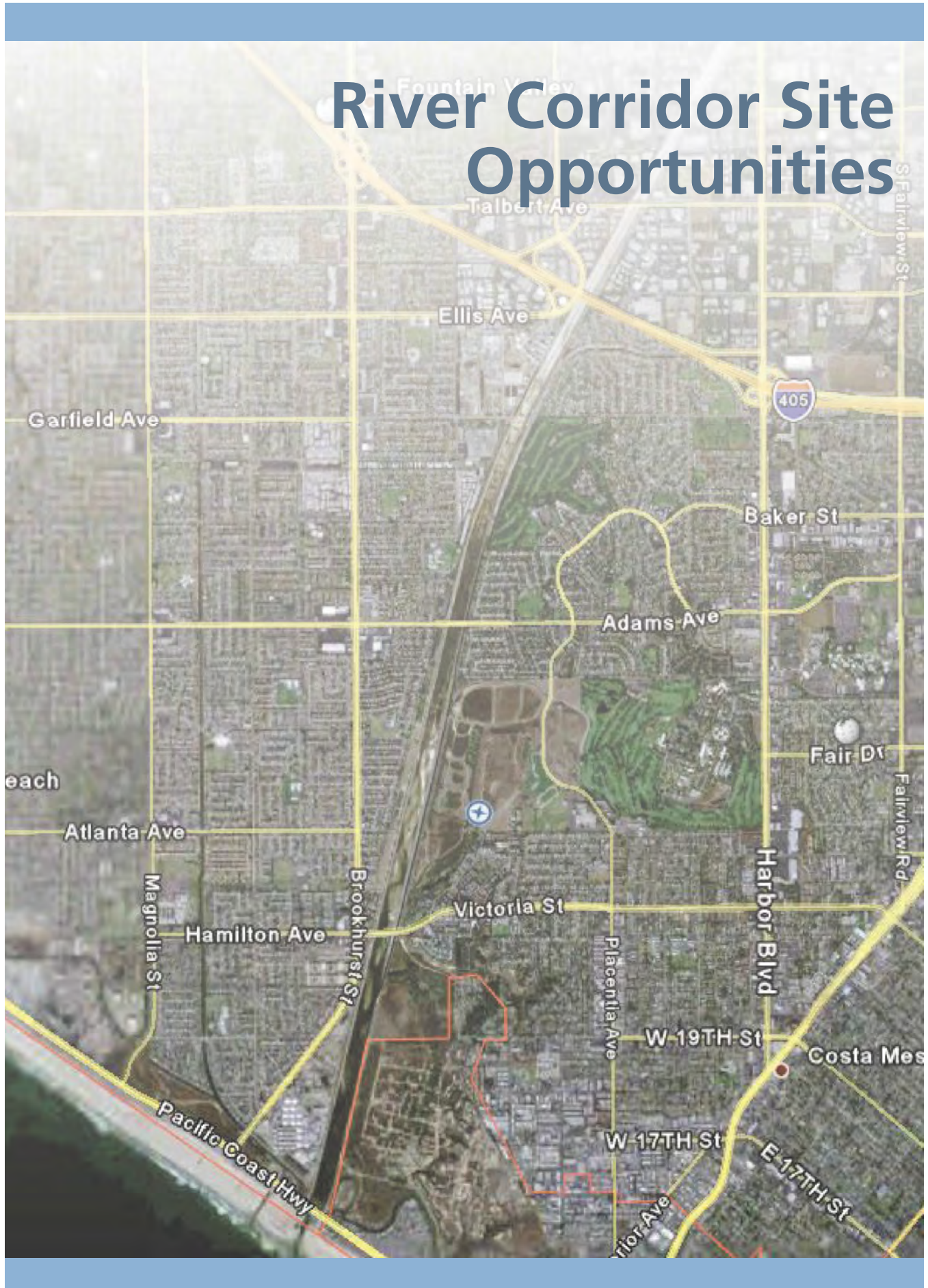
Figure 12: Bikes and Pedestrians sharing the Santa Ana River Trail.



Figure 13: High speed group cycling use.

- Some proposed types of recreation along/adjacent to the trail may not be appropriate or compatible with surrounding land uses.
- Many informal trails have been formed between the levee and the lower trails, damaging vegetation and causing erosion (*Figure 10: Informal Trails Along Levee*).
- There are many locked gates along the trail corridor which block access (*Figure 11: Locked Gates at Pedestrian Trail Entrance*).
- Given the volume and speed of bike use along trail, there are potential user conflicts (*Figure 12: Bikes and Pedestrians Sharing the Santa Ana River Trail, Figure 13: High Speed Group Cycling Use*).
- There is no dedicated public safety patrol for the river corridor at this time.
- Additional amenities such as interpretive and directional signs, rest areas and trash receptacles are needed along trail.
- When using the trail, it is difficult to identify when one is entering or leaving the City of Costa Mesa due to a lack of identify signs.
- There are no strong east-west trail connections to the Santa Ana River
- There are many planning efforts underway as well as upcoming opportunities for Santa Ana River-specific funding for trail, open space and parkway enhancements.

River Corridor Site Opportunities



River Corridor Site Opportunities

Based on characteristics of various stretches of the Santa Ana River corridor and adjacent areas, the Committee described the river as five distinct reaches (Figure 14: Santa Ana River Reaches through Costa Mesa). For each reach, the following site-specific observations, opportunities and recommendations were identified.

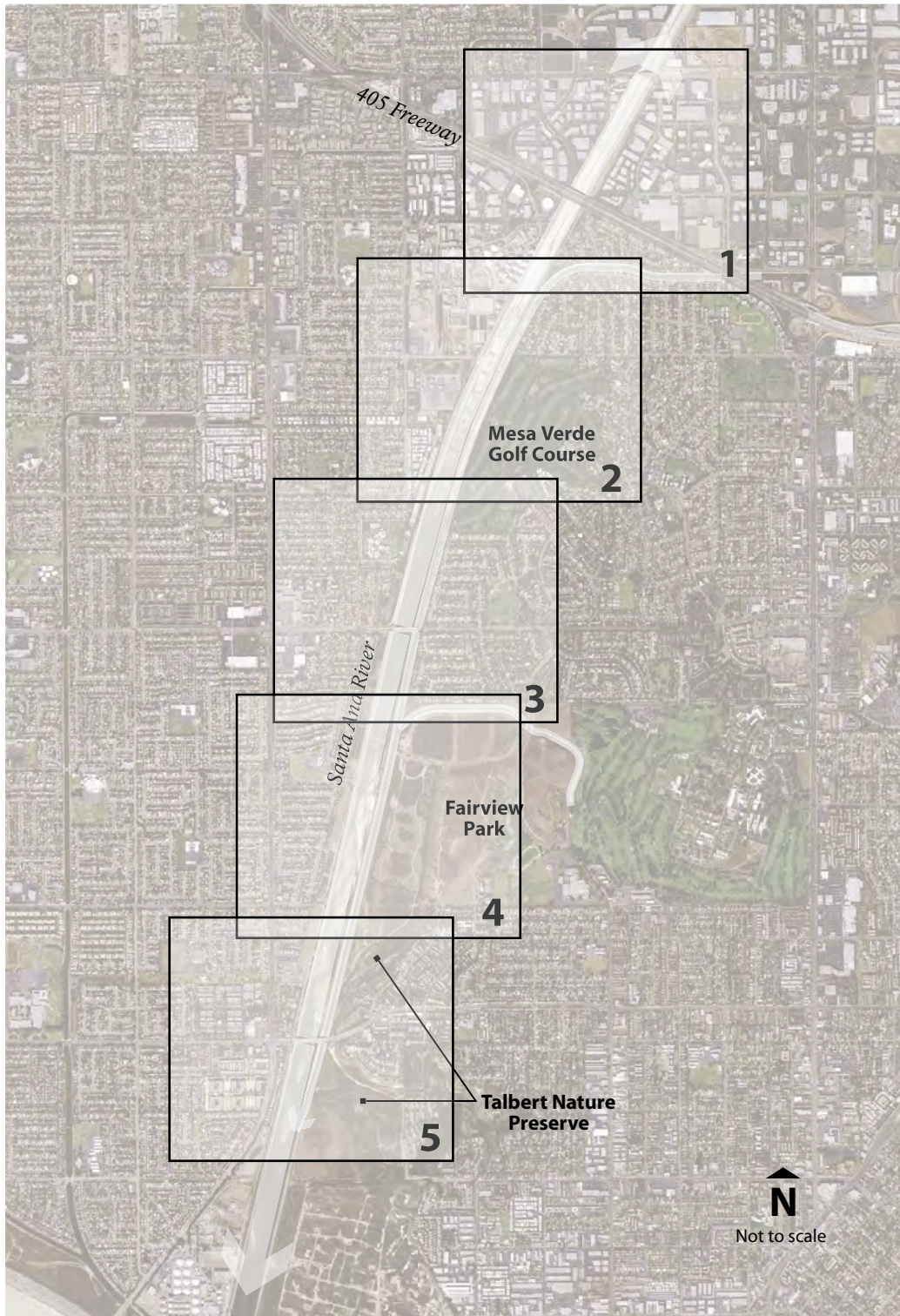


Figure 14: Santa Ana River Reaches through Costa Mesa

Reach 1: MacArthur Boulevard to Greenville Banning Channel- Open Space Opportunities and Connections

This northernmost stretch of the Santa Ana River offers several opportunities (*Figure 15: River Reach 1 Observations and Recommendations*). Immediately to the east of the river is a large, flat 6.4-acre area that is currently occupied by Southern California Edison (SCE) and houses transmission lines (*Figure 16: Southern California Edison Corridor Site*). Beyond this site are industrial park uses. The Santa Ana River Trail along this reach of the river is located on top of the levee and thus is upslope from the SCE site.

Bikeway connections exist upstream of the I-405 freeway with Class I (off road, paved) bikeways at MacArthur Boulevard and just north of I-405. These connections provide an opportunity to link adjacent areas to the Santa Ana River Trail, particularly for employees working in the industrial park to the east.

Downstream of the I-405 freeway, the river passes through single-family residential neighborhoods until reaching Mesa Verde Country Club. Within the residential area, two



Figure 16: Southern California Edison Corridor Site.

As a relatively large, level site, the 6.4-acre space adjacent to the river that is used as a corridor for transmission lines could integrate open space and recreation uses.



Figure 17: Moon Park



Figure 18: Trail between Moon and Suburbia Parks

city parks, Moon and Suburbia Parks are adjacent to the river providing an opportunity to connect trail users to amenities and provide direct connections to the river for residents (*Figure 17: Moon Park*). Much of this stretch of trail includes a soft-surface shoulder adjacent to the paved trail for pedestrian use (*Figure 18: Trail between Moon and Suburbia Parks*). Adjacent to Suburbia Park is a small unused space that could be further enhanced for trail users. Also adjacent to Suburbia Park is the Greenville Banning Channel, which has a service road that provides an opportunity for a trail connection eastward.

Observations and Recommendations

- Provide a gateway entry sign at the northern boundary of Costa Mesa along the River (MacArthur Boulevard).
- Enhance area where the river meets MacArthur Boulevard as a potential rest stop/pocket park with signs, landscaping and other amenities.
- At northern reach of river, possibly provide trail connection to business parks for employees to access the river. Explore potential to develop an agreement with private property owners to connect to their property(ies) to the river.
- Coordinate with SCE to evaluate the feasibility of using their utility right-of-way for open space and/or recreation.
- Create a trail loop at the business park north of I-405. Enhance the existing greenway along the “Cadillac Trail” portion of this loop (*Figure 19: “Cadillac Trail” Connection*).
- Enhance trail undercrossing at I-405 with murals and potential lighting (*Figure 20: I-405 Undercrossing*).
- Enhance a portion of the utility road on top of levee just south of I-405 as an overlook/ rest area and/or provide landscaping.
- Convert to a pocket park the vacant area northeast of where New Hampshire Drive crosses the Greenville Banning Channel .
- Enhance vacant area immediately south of Suburbia Park into a pocket park or rest area (*Figure 21: Suburbia Park Area*).
- Enhance service road on the west side of Greenville Banning Channel to provide short trail loop opportunities (*Figure 22: Trail Opportunity on West Side of Greenville Banning Channel*).



Figure 17: "Cadillac Trail" Connection



Figure 18: I-405 Undercrossing

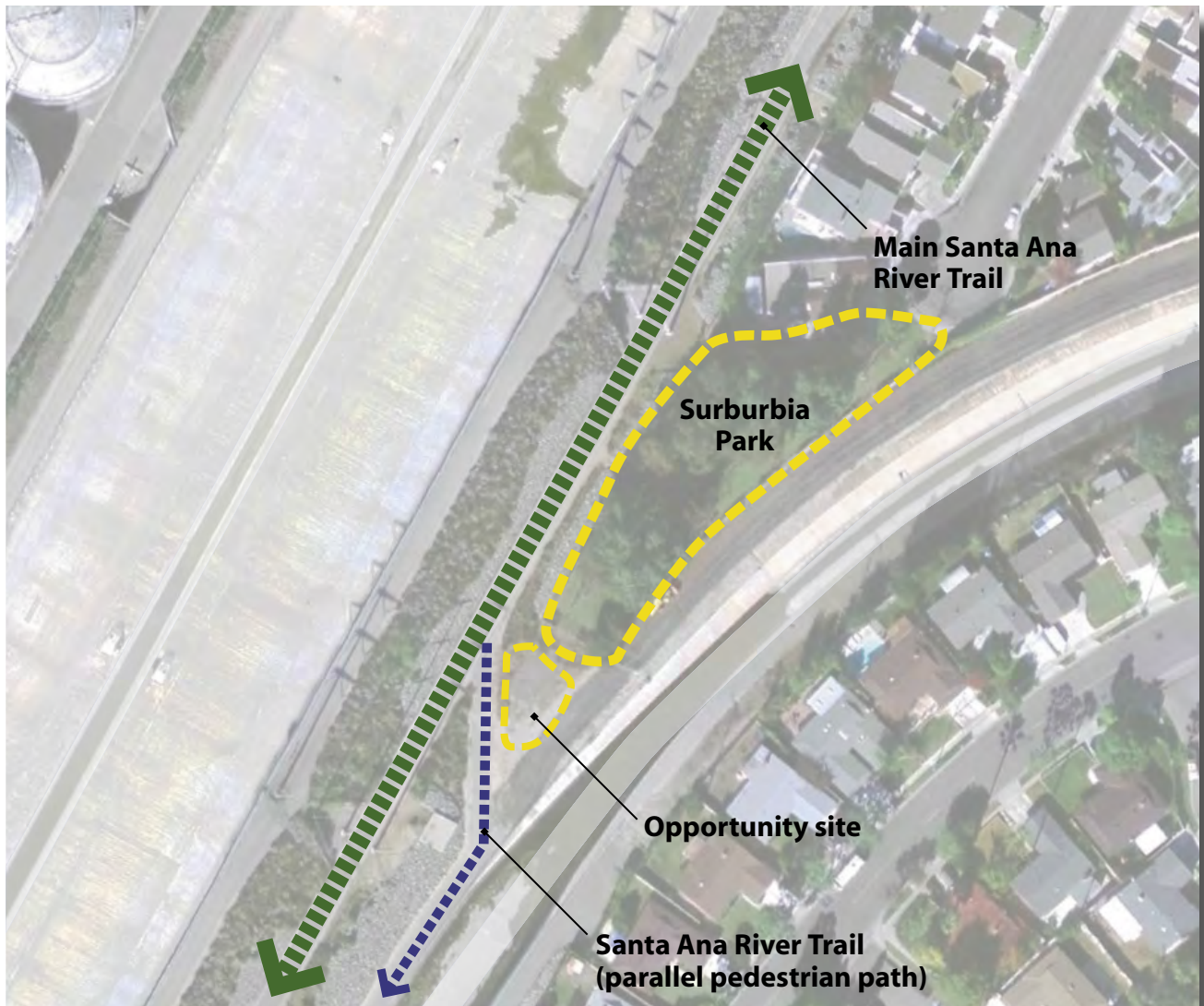


Figure 19: Suburbia Park Area



Figure 22: Trail Opportunity on West Side of Greenville Banning Channel
An existing and currently used pedestrian trail parallel to the main Santa Ana River Trail runs adjacent to the west side of the Greenville Banning Channel.

Reach 2: Greenville Banning Channel to Mesa Verde Country Club- Neighborhood-Scale Access, Multiple Paths

This reach of the Santa Ana River Trail corridor provides multiple, parallel trails but limited access to adjacent areas (*Figure 23: River Reach 2 Observations and Recommendations*). From where the Greenville Banning Channel turns south and parallels the Santa Ana River by Suburbia Park downstream to the Mesa Verde Country Club, the majority of land uses along the river are single family residential. Along most of this reach, the Santa Ana River Trail has two parallel paths, one paved on the levee and another partially-paved along the west side of the Greenville Banning Channel. The latter is characterized by a large rocky berm to the west that covers a sewer line and the channel to the east (*Figure 24: Divided Trail South of Suburbia Park*). There is no access to the trail for these residents south of Suburbia Park and east of the channel except for a bridge that was installed at Gisler Avenue that connects to a Class I, paved bikeway extending eastward from the river (*Figure 25: Gisler Bridge*).

At Gisler, the trail enters a landscaped area that is characterized by native and drought-tolerant plantings and in some places, “wetland” areas that appear to be the result of leaking pipes (*Figure 27: Native Landscaping; Figure 28: “Wetland” Area*).

Observations and Recommendations

- Formalize the path west of the Greenville Banning Channel and south of Suburbia Park as a pedestrian trail that parallels the paved Santa Ana River trail and provide amenities (i.e. trash cans and dog waste bag dispensers).
- Enhance the rock “mulch” that separates the Santa Ana River trail from adjacent residences by planting native vegetation.
- Enhance the rock berm that separates the Santa Ana River trail from the parallel natural surface trail by planting native vegetation.



Figure 24: Divided Trail South of Suburbia Park



Figure 25: Gisler Bridge

- Explore opportunities for pocket park upgrades along the trail corridor north of Mesa Verde Country Club.
- Eliminate and rehabilitate informal trails that have been cut between the two paths of the Santa Ana River Trail.



Figure 27: Native landscaping



Figure 28: "Wetland" Area

Reach 3: Mesa Verde Country Club to Fairview Park- Enhanced User Experience through Separated Trail Uses

For most of this river reach, the separate two parallel routes of the Santa Ana River Trail reconverge into one, with all users sharing the same path (*Figure 29: River Reach 3 Observations and Recommendations*). With cyclists travelling at high speeds, this can become challenging for all users, particularly where the trail passes under bridges. The bottleneck beneath Adams Avenue is particularly challenging with little shoulder on either side of the trail for passing other users (*Figure 30: Greenville Banning Access Road; Figure 31: Adams Avenue Undercrossing; Figure 32: Narrow Reach of the Santa Ana River Trail*).



Figure 30: Greenville Banning Access Road

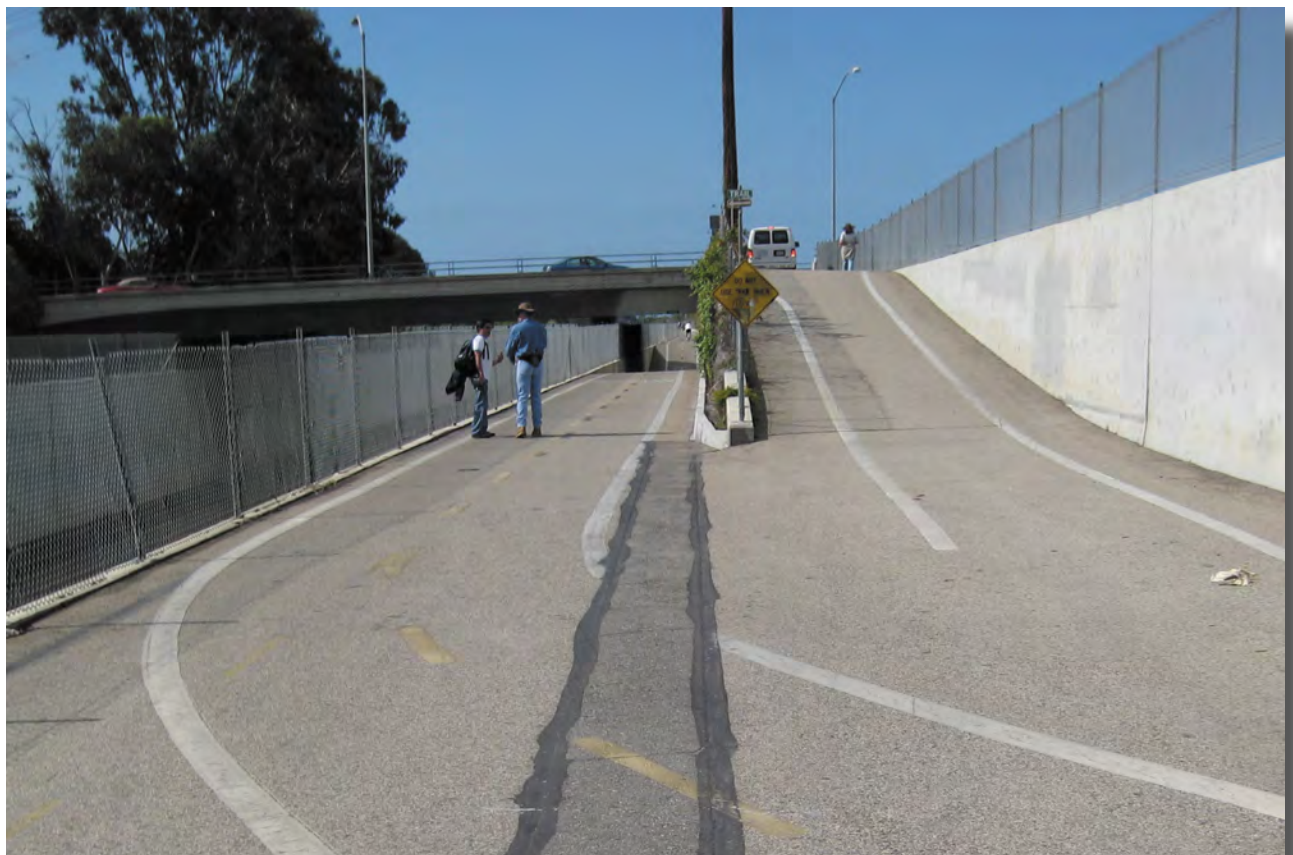


Figure 31: Adams Avenue Undercrossing

Observations and Recommendations

- Enhance and expand the existing drainage wetland areas along the natural pathway south of Gisler Avenue.
- Assess alternatives to existing Adams Avenue trail undercrossing, which is a narrow and potentially dangerous chokepoint.



Figure 32: Narrow Reach of the Santa Ana River Trail

Reach 4: Fairview Park-Strengthening Connections

One of the greatest assets along the Santa Ana River through Costa Mesa is Fairview Park along with adjacent Talbert Nature Preserve. This reach of the river provides opportunities for nature observation as well as connections to Fairview Park, Estancia High School, and Waldorf School of Orange County to the west; and the City of Huntington Beach to the east via a pedestrian/bike bridge over the Santa Ana River (*Figure 33: River Reach 4 Opportunities and Recommendations*).

There are significant opportunities to enhance the trail experience through this river reach. Most notably, the trail connection between the bridge over the river and Talbert Nature Preserve could be enhanced for more direct access across the river. To travel via trail between Huntington Beach and Talbert Nature Preserve, a $\frac{3}{4}$ -mile detour is needed to cross the Greenville Banning Channel and descend to the Santa Ana River Trail (*Figure 34: Huntington Beach-Talbert Nature Preserve Connection; Figure 35: Greenville Banning Channel Bridge*).

Observations and Recommendations

- Assess the potential for equestrian trail access and staging at Talbert Nature Preserve.
- Explore opportunities for user access to the Santa Ana River trail between Adams Avenue and Fairview Park.
- Develop a more direct connection between the bridge across the Santa Ana River to Huntington Beach and the bridge across the Greenville Banning Channel.
- Provide small rest areas with overlooks along Talbert Nature Preserve (*Figure 36: Trail Overlook Opportunity*).
- Explore opportunities for greater trail connectivity to Talbert Nature Preserve by removing the fencing, formalizing access, and providing directional signage.



Figure 35: Greenville Banning Channel Bridge



Figure 36: Trail Overlook Opportunity



Figure 34: Huntington Beach-Talbert Nature Preserve Connection
 Currently, trail users connecting between Huntington Beach and Talbert Nature Preserve must take a 3/4-mile detour, due to the lack of a bridge over Greenville Banning Channel that aligns with the bridge over the river.

Reach 5: Fairview Park to 19th Street-Enhancing Habitat and Recreation

The southernmost reach of the Santa Ana River through Costa Mesa extends from Fairview Park, south across Victoria Street to 19th Street. Most of this reach is adjacent to the County of Orange’s southern portion of Talbert Nature Preserve. While the trail is adjacent to the edge of the Preserve, there are few access points that connect them. There are many opportunities to enhance these connections to provide a more seamless experience between the Santa Ana River, Talbert Nature Preserve, Fairview Park and Vista Park (*Figure 37: River Reach 5 Observations and Recommendations*). In addition, the portion of Talbert Nature Preserve just north of Victoria Street could be enhanced for both habitat and recreational values (*Figure 38: Degraded Habitat in Talbert Nature Preserve*).

One major challenge for both the northern and southern portions of Talbert Nature Preserve is trail staging and access. The Preserve currently has no parking and limited connections to the Santa Ana River Trail. Downstream of Victoria Street, in the southern portion of the Talbert Nature Preserve, Victoria Pond provides an unique opportunity for nature observation and interpretation (*Figure 39: Victoria Pond*). The rest of this southern area of the Preserve could also be enhanced for habitat and recreation.

The last portion of the Santa Ana River Trail in the Costa Mesa area is at the southern edge of Talbert Nature Preserve, where the 19th Street alignment would extend westward towards the river. This corridor, while not formally designated as a trail, currently functions as a vital connection for residents to the east who access the Santa Ana River Trail this way.



Figure 38: Degraded Habitat in Southern Talbert Nature Preserve



Figure 39: Victoria Pond



Figure 40: 19th Street Corridor Connection

Observations and Recommendations

- Enhance the visual quality of Talbert Nature Preserve directly north of Victoria Street.
- Remove *Arundo donax* (invasive plant) and restore native vegetation within the riparian corridor in southern area of Talbert Nature Preserve north of Victoria Street.
- Explore opportunities to provide direct connections between Vista Park, Talbert Nature Preserve and the Santa Ana River Trail.
- Develop area southeast of the intersection of the Santa Ana River Trail and Victoria Street as a rest stop and staging area.
- Enhance Victoria Pond as a visitor destination and rest area.
- Explore feasibility of trail connections between Canyon Park and Talbert Nature Preserve south of Victoria Street
- Provide gateway entry sign at the southern boundary of Costa Mesa along the River
- Explore feasibility of establishing a formal trail connection to the river along the 19th Street corridor.

Vision



Vision

Based on the Committee’s observations, the following long term vision statement for the Santa Ana River Trail corridor describes the desired future condition of the river and its role in the community:

“Restore and enhance the varied amenities within and the connections and access between the coastal bluffs, riparian lowlands, and wetlands to the Santa Ana River corridor as natural open space that provides recreation, reflection, and education opportunities for the benefit of residents and visitors of Costa Mesa.”

Goals & Objectives

The following goals identify near and mid-range outcomes that support long term realization of the vision. The supporting objectives under each goal identify specific, shorter term tasks that will help to accomplish these goals:

1. **A river corridor in which the natural resources and character are preserved, restored and enhanced.**
 - a. Restore and enhance natural habitat within and around the Santa Ana River Trail and connecting trails.
 - i. Use appropriate native plants for habitat value, habitat connectivity and ornamental landscaping.
 - ii. Install irrigation systems to support habitat enhancement and restoration and ornamental landscaping.
 - iii. Partner with the native plant nursery at the Huntington Beach Wetlands and Wildlife Care Center to grow appropriate native plant stock.
 - b. Expand and enhance park land along the Santa Ana River corridor.
 - i. Evaluate opportunities for appropriate and compatible uses along the river corridor (i.e. active recreation, motocross uses, etc.).
 - ii. Identify opportunities for informal, unstructured spaces where “kids can be kids”.
 - c. Enhance water resources, including wetlands, along the Santa Ana River corridor.
 - i. Develop and implement storm water best management practices along the river corridor.



Pocket park along the Los Angeles River utilizing native plants for landscaping.

2. An interconnected Santa Ana River corridor multiuse trail and open space network with improved connectivity, circulation, and public access.

a. Create east-west connectivity from the Santa Ana River to major nodes and destinations in Costa Mesa and beyond to Upper Newport Bay.

- i. Evaluate mobility options for east-west connections to the Santa Ana River corridor (i.e. Greenville-Banning Channel, etc.).
- ii. Evaluate public transit connections to the corridor.



Local, neighborhood-scale access along the Los Angeles River in Elysian Valley.

b. Improve connectivity to and within the Santa Ana River corridor.

- i. Reevaluate and, as needed, enhance connections through existing parks.
- ii. Assess the many informal social trails that have been formed (i.e. between the levee and the lower trails, 19th Street extension, etc.) to determine if they need to be improved or eliminated.

c. Improve access to and within the Santa Ana River corridor.

- i. Provide safe trail opportunities for a variety of users, including paved trails for wheeled use and softer surfaces for pedestrian users.
- ii. Develop unified gateway entries to the Santa Ana River corridor that relate to the themes of the river corridor to increase visibility and aesthetics.
- iii. Coordinate with the County of Orange to better manage gate locks for enhanced public access.
- iv. Identify opportunities for additional trailhead parking.

3. Enhanced visitor experience of the Santa Ana River corridor.

a. Increase community, resident and visitor awareness and use of the Santa Ana River corridor.

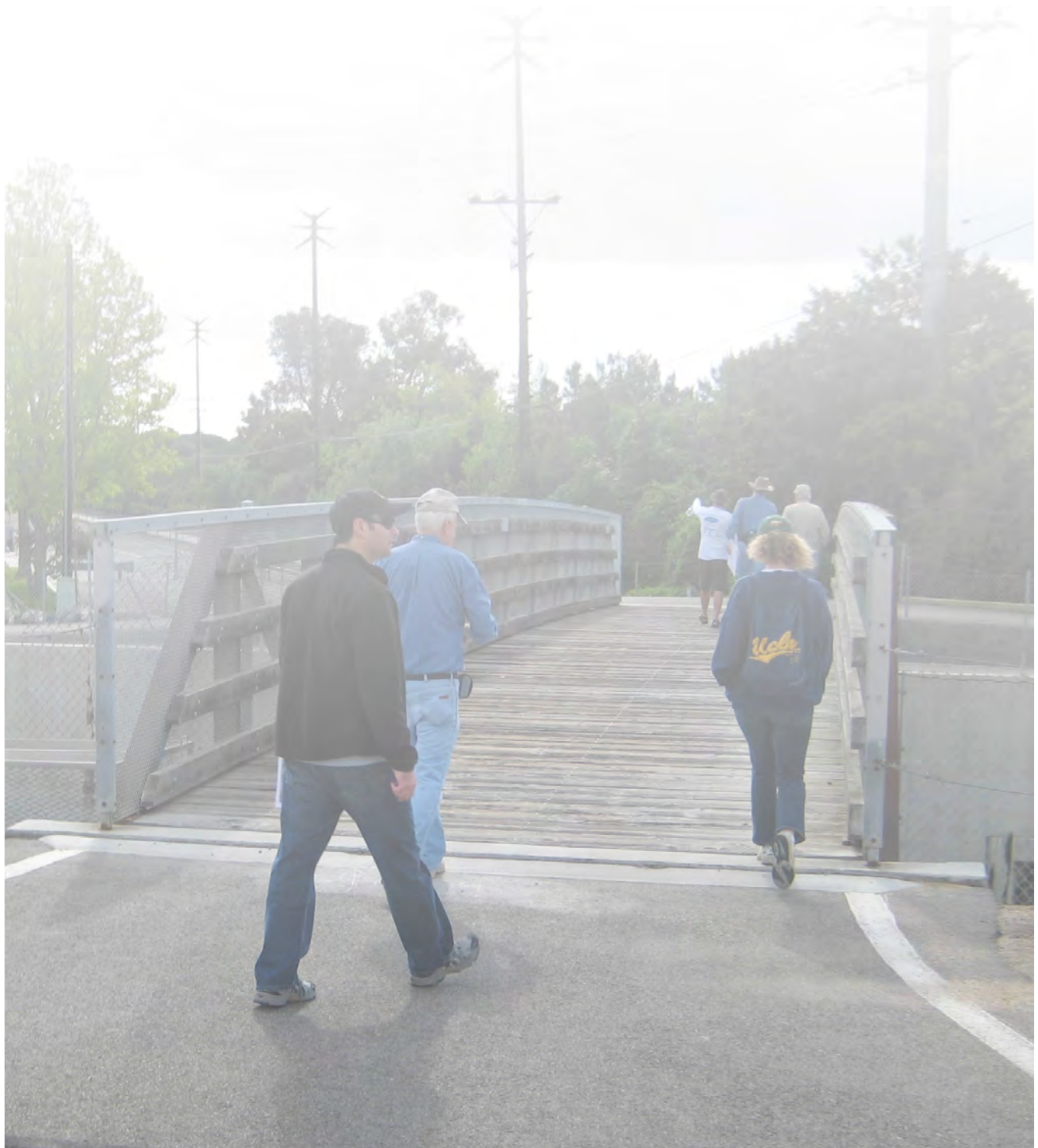
- i. Develop an interpretation program and docents.
- ii. Develop and install informational and interpretive signage.
- iii. Develop branding program for this reach of the river corridor to better identify the City of Costa Mesa.
- iv. Encourage, participate in and sponsor events along the trail or within adjacent parks.
- v. Encourage use by schools for educational programs.



Proposed trail enhancements along the San Gabriel River (from San Gabriel River Master Plan, Los Angeles County. Image prepared by MIG, Inc.).

- b. Enhance user and recreation experience along the Santa Ana River corridor.
 - i. Incorporate public art.
 - ii. Develop and install mile/kilometer markers.
 - iii. Install and service trash and recycling receptacles, including dog waste bag dispensers, along the Santa Ana River trail and connecting trails.
- c. Build support for the Santa Ana River.
 - i. Establish a sense of community ownership of parks and trails.
 - ii. Compile and distribute information about the benefits of trails and greenways.
 - iii. Consider development of a sponsorship programs for trail enhancements (i.e. adopt-a-trail, etc.).
- d. Enhance safety along the Santa Ana River corridor.
 - i. Evaluate the feasibility of installing lighting along the Santa Ana River trail, particularly within and around trail undercrossings.
 - ii. Explore alternatives to improve safety by reducing potential trail user conflicts around narrow trail chokepoints, particularly around the Adams Avenue undercrossing. Consider providing a separate trail for pedestrians--given the volume and speed of bike use along trail, there are potential conflicts with pedestrian users.
 - iii. Explore potential for safety monitoring such as bike patrols, cameras, motion-triggered lights and voice recordings, etc.

Proposed Actions





Proposed Actions

While some recommendations can be achieved in the short term, realizing the long term vision for the Santa Ana River in Costa Mesa will require a commensurate commitment from City Council, City staff and the community. Considering this, the Committee proposes the following next steps to fully realize this vision:

- Engage community and other stakeholders early in and throughout the planning and implementation process.
- Work with residents adjacent to the River to identify their concerns, gather their suggestions and develop potential solutions.
- Engage constituencies beyond the main stem of the Santa Ana River.
- Implement a demonstration project adjacent to neighborhoods receptive to the concept of a river project to show the benefits of river enhancement.
- Conduct outreach and education to show implementation tools and benefits to the community.
- Coordinate with other cities, agencies and organizations that have undertaken similar “Blue Ribbon” processes. Explore opportunities for implementation of common goals and objectives.
- Build upon the existing momentum and support for use and enhancement of the Santa Ana River.
- Identify, define and prioritize specific projects based on Vision Study goals, objectives and community input.
- Continue to explore alternatives for implementing an east-west connecting trail across Costa Mesa that will connect to the Santa Ana River corridor.
- Encourage the City’s Parks and Recreation Commission to hold workshops to receive input on project ideas and prioritization from the public.
- Build on the Orange Coast River Park partnership agreement Memorandum of Agreement.
- Explore project, program and partnership opportunities.
- Explore alternatives for management of corridor in partnership with The Wildlands Conservancy and other stakeholders.
- Develop an interagency maintenance plan with Santa Ana River stakeholders.
- Research and pursue potential federal, state and local funding, particularly Proposition 84
- Appoint a follow-up Ad Hoc Committee to facilitate moving the vision study towards implementation.
- Coordinate with Cities of Newport Beach and Huntington Beach to develop a cooperative implementation strategy for the lower reach of the Santa Ana River.

