


MOUNTAINS RECREATION & CONSERVATION AUTHORITY

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MEMORANDUM

TO: The Governing Board


FROM: Joseph T. Edmiston, FAICP, Hon. ASLA, Executive Officer

DATE: November 7, 2012

SUBJECT: **Agenda Item IX: Consideration of resolution authorizing application to the Santa Monica Mountains Conservancy for grant funds for improvements to the Los Angeles River Center and Gardens.**

Staff Recommendation: That the Governing Board adopt the attached resolution authorizing application to the Santa Monica Mountains Conservancy for grant funds in the amount of \$750,000 for improvements to the Los Angeles River Center and Gardens.

Background: Since opening in March 2000, the Los Angeles River Center and Gardens (River Center) has proved to be an extremely popular location for a variety of activities ranging from Los Angeles River educational programs, public and private special events, and non-profit and community meetings. The River Center has established itself as a hub for environmental activism related to river revitalization, water resources, and sustainable development—all of these issues correlate with the MRCA's mission to preserve and manage local open space and parkland, watershed lands, trails, and wildlife habitat. Several non-profit community groups dedicated to these issues maintain offices at the River Center, and MRCA constantly has to turn down requests from community groups for office space.

The River Center is a well-utilized venue that needs facility upgrades to keep up with public use demand and extend the lifespan of the facility. With access from two interstate highways, Metro Gold Line and Rapid busses, and only 3 miles east of downtown Los Angeles, the River Center's indoor and outdoor spaces are utilized year-round by a wide range of constituents. In addition to housing organizations dedicated to conservation issues, the meeting rooms and grounds are frequently used by other community groups, elected officials, and many government agencies for public meetings and trainings on all kinds of topics. The River Center's central location, free parking, and attractive grounds makes it an ideal, non-intimidating venue for members of the public who may be attending a meeting for the first time. All of these visitors are exposed to the educational exhibits about the Los Angeles River and the property's natural resources, helping to foster stewardship in the

community and the environment.

Situated less than a half-mile from the banks of the Los Angeles River and its confluence with the Arroyo Seco, the River Center is a centrally located facility that demonstrates efficient use of public land and promotes environmental consciousness. The River Center is located on the National Park Service's Juan Bautista de Anza National Historical Trail, and anchors the Los Angeles River Greenway/Bikeway in Elysian Valley, offering bicyclists and strollers amenities such as restrooms, water fountains, educational exhibits about the Los Angeles River, a youth Futsal court, and beautiful gardens within to take respite. These amenities are crucial also for the disadvantaged local community which is considered park-poor by the State Department of Parks and Recreation. Many community members visit the River Center's grounds on daily walks or to enjoy their lunches in the park.

In addition to the public uses, the River Center also has value for urban wildlife, particularly for bird habitat. As can be clearly seen on an aerial photo, the River Center's mature trees provide an island of habitat in close proximity to the river and Elysian Park. The River Garden Park on the grounds, added in 2000, provides a demonstration of native trees, shrubs, and grasses in addition to augmenting the tree canopy.

Capital improvements are necessary to the buildings, grounds, and infrastructure to provide continued safe and enjoyable public use of the River Center facility. Before acquisition in 1998, the buildings and grounds had been vacant for over seven years, and many deferred maintenance problems developed. Since then, all funds available for capital improvements were used for the most critical projects necessary to keep the property open for public enjoyment. Adequate funding for all of the facility work required has not been available, and decisions regarding which improvements can be made have often been based on emergency needs.

Objectives of the Los Angeles River Center & Gardens Improvements project are to protect, restore, preserve and develop the park's resources to allow the continued use and enjoyment of the facility, and increase the capacity to serve park visitors. Park visitors will have access to indoor and outdoor public meeting spaces, educational exhibits, visitor-serving amenities including restrooms, drinking fountains, and bicycle parking, and outdoor recreational areas. These objectives will be achieved by improvements to building systems including HVAC, lighting and A/V, accessibility, energy efficiency, and weather proofing, and improvements to outdoor landscaped areas including lighting, accessibility, and plantings.

Project Components: In 2010 MRCA was granted Proposition A funds from Los Angeles County for improvements to portions of the Sierra Madre Building and Barbacoa Building for public uses. In August 2012 MRCA applied for a Proposition

A Tree-Planting grant from Los Angeles County for the River Center and staff have received verbal notification that funds will be awarded. Additional work on the property, beyond the means of the Prop A grants, is necessary to make it available for all manner of public programs and special uses. Rehabilitation of the existing public areas and gardens must also be included when upgrading the Sierra Madre and Barbacoa buildings due to the interconnection of utility infrastructure and to promote the highest level of efficiency upgrades.

Some of the improvements that are needed include new roofing for at least four buildings, replacement of aging and failing HVAC systems for at least two buildings, replacement of worn finishes, stabilization of courtyard elements, more efficient lighting systems, and accessibility improvements. Improved audio/visual systems in the meeting spaces are also desired to better serve the public. These proposed improvements will serve to protect the facilities so that they can continue to be used for public enjoyment.

MRCA staff will do much of the planning work in house, and consult with specialists as needed. Some consultants will be needed to efficiently manage the workflow of specialty sub-contractors required for the construction. The most critical items, such as roofing, will be undertaken first. Major work will be scheduled around planned events, and implementation may extend over multiple years. An investment of additional capital funds at this time would allow the work funded by Proposition A to be most efficiently coordinated with these other projects at the facility.

California Building: The Atrium in the California Building, commonly used for public meetings, needs to be markedly improved with efficient and well-planned lighting, audio/visual capabilities, and noise attenuation. Similar upgrades are needed for the Los Feliz Room to improve its use for small and medium-size group meetings. All of the restrooms in the facility could be upgraded with more efficient fixtures and easier-to-maintain finishes.

Sierra Madre Building: The roof of the Sierra Madre Building was replaced in 2011, allowing interior renovations to occur. A portion of HVAC work was completed at the same time as the roof. This building has an accessible elevator, making the second floor appropriate for public use. The second floor of the Sierra Madre Building will be converted into public meeting space, with one large room and two smaller areas appropriate for break-out sessions. In order for this space to function effectively, a number of sound attenuation upgrades are necessary, and partitions must be constructed, in addition to adequate lighting, new audio-visual capacity and clean interior finishes. Deteriorated flooring and ceiling tiles will be replaced, and some built-in shelving and dated wood paneling will be removed to make the space more versatile.

Barbacoa Building: This building contains a dining room that would be appropriate for meetings and special events if convenient restrooms were available. In 2003, restrooms for this building were partially constructed, but the funding available at that time was insufficient and they were not completed. The remaining work includes finishes, fixtures, and completion of utility services. These new accessible restrooms would serve the new meeting room in the Sierra Madre Building as well as the Barbacoa and main courtyard. The Barbacoa dining room requires minor lighting additions and finishes to function for meetings. Removal of non-functioning equipment from the former kitchen would make that space usable for storage of meeting tables and chairs.

Grounds: The main courtyards contain pavement that has been uplifted by tree roots and requires replacement, and many of the trees are at the end of their life cycle. This replacement will provide an opportunity to improve the drainage system and plant trees that will provide additional tree canopy for shade and bird habitat. At the River Garden Park, moving the fountain pump to grade would ameliorate the problems of failing motors and clogging caused by its current underground location.

Margarita Bar: In 2011 the roof of the Margarita Bar building was replaced. Now that it is stabilized, the interior of the building could be modified for public use. Restrooms located off the main courtyard have never been open to the public due to their deteriorated condition. Renovating these restrooms would facilitate expanded use of the courtyards.

MRCA Building: The roof of the MRCA Building has exceeded its useful life span and requires replacement. New HVAC for several areas is required but cannot be installed until roofing is completed. Flooring on the second floor requires stabilization.

Analysis: The proposed improvements to the Los Angeles River Center and Gardens are consistent with all applicable plans, including the following:

- San Gabriel and Los Angeles Rivers Watershed and Open Space Plan (Common Ground)
- City of Los Angeles, Los Angeles River Revitalization Master Plan
- County of Los Angeles, Los Angeles River Master Plan
- City of Los Angeles, Cornfield Arroyo Specific Plan
- County of Los Angeles General Plan
- Rim of the Valley Trail Corridor Master Plan
- Juan Bautista de Anza National Historical Trail
- Los Angeles River Center and Gardens Project Plan
- Santa Monica Mountains Conservancy Strategic Plan

Common Ground: Funds for the proposed grant are designated in Proposition 84, Section 75050 (g)(2) of the California Water Code, which references Section 79508. Section 79508 requires that watershed protection activities in the Los Angeles River watershed shall be consistent with the *San Gabriel and Los Angeles Rivers Watershed and Open Space Plan*, also known as the "Common Ground" plan. The Common Ground plan includes several Guiding Principles that are intended to be used to plan and implement projects. The proposed project is consistent with the following Guiding Principles from the Common Ground plan:

Improve Access to Open Space and Recreation for All Communities

- Accommodate active and passive recreational uses: The River Center's facilities are open to the public, including opportunities for passive recreation in the River Garden Park, and a Futsal court used for youth active recreation. Meeting rooms are available for public meetings at no charge. The proposed improvements would increase public access.

Improve Habitat Quality, Quantity, and Connectivity

- Maintain and enhance wildlife corridors as continuous linkages: The Los Angeles River serves as a wildlife corridor through the Los Angeles area. The River Center is located very near the River and Elysian Park and the property contains a high proportion of mature tree canopy, supporting avian wildlife.

Connect Open Space with a Network of Trails

- Develop continuous bike trail, equestrian, and public access systems along riverfronts and within the watershed; ▪ Connect river trails to mountain trails, urban trails, local parks, open spaces, and beaches; ▪ Connect open spaces to transit access points: The River Center facility includes a small bike stop that was developed to complement the Los Angeles River Greenway/Bikeway and serve commuters traveling to the Metro Gold Line station 0.1 miles away. Eight different MTA bus lines stop within 1-2 blocks of the property. More public use of the property will correlate to more use of the public trails.

Promote Stewardship of the Landscape

- Identify, preserve, and restore historic sites and cultural landscapes: The proposed project will preserve and restore portions of the Los Angeles River Center and Gardens, formerly the Lawry's California Center. Lawry's was a familiar institution to long-time Angelinos and has been called a cultural landmark by the *Los Angeles Times*.

Encourage Sustainable Growth to Balance Environmental, Social, and Economic Benefits

- Preserve major open spaces and limit urban sprawl: The proposed project is on land previously developed and located well within the metro area of Los Angeles.

No aspects of the project will encourage sprawl or development of open space. ■
Improve and Expand Existing Facilities: While River Center is well-utilized, there are spaces that are underutilized. Once rehabilitated and made safe for public use, the public enjoyment and community purposes of the River Center will be optimized.

Establish Riverfront Greenways to Cleanse Water, Hold Floodwaters, and Extend Open Space

■ Create a continuous network of parks along the waterways; ■ Connect communities to the waterways by extended greenways: The River Center is an anchor for the Los Angeles River Greenway/Bikeway and provides access to and along the river.

Coordinate Watershed Planning Across Jurisdictions and Boundaries

■ Partner with all relevant agency officials, staff, and elected officials throughout the process; ■ Develop a coordinated regional approach to obtain federal, state, and local funding; ■ Encourage and facilitate public and private partnerships to implement projects: The River Center was originally acquired and opened to the public through a partnership of local and state agencies and funding sources. Several Los Angeles River related non-profit organizations are housed at the River Center, creating a convenient center for restoration and other efforts on the river. By performing work necessary to allow for the continued (and increased) use of the property and facilities, the proposed improvements will allow these partnerships to continue.

Involve the Public Through Education and Outreach Programs

■ Conduct public educational and outreach programs to promote watershed restoration: Meeting facilities at the River Center are available for public and community programs at no or nominal charge. The property provides interpretation and education opportunities to promote watershed restoration.

Utilize the Plan in an On-going Management Process

■ Assure CEQA compliance in approval of proposed projects: The proposed work is categorically exempt per §15301 and §15304. A Notice of Exemption was filed by MRCA on August 23, 2011.

Optimize Water Resources to Reduce Dependence on Imported Water

■ Expand water conservation programs: The improvements to the River Garden Park pump and new water-efficient fixtures will reduce the amount of water used by the facility. The grounds contain open space for the cleansing of water and a cistern for water conservation.

Los Angeles River Revitalization Master Plan

The *Los Angeles River Revitalization Master Plan* was adopted by the City Council of the City of Los Angeles in 2007. The River Center lies within the plan's "Opportunity Area 10-Arroyo Seco Confluence" and will support the plan's recommendations by taking advantage of publicly-owned facilities and strong civic and environmental organizational support.

The proposed improvements are consistent with the plan's overall goals to:

- Create a continuous river greenway: The River Center has been included as a major stopping point/feature on the Los Angeles River Greenway/Bikeway since it opened in 2000, and is part of a river access loop trail that connects to Confluence Park, the Bikeway, and the Metro Gold Line Cypress Park station.
- Connect neighborhoods to the river: As part of the river access loop path, the project complies with recommendation 5.5 to create non-motorized routes between the river and cultural institutions and parks.
- Extend open space, recreation, and water quality features into neighborhoods: Recommendation 5.8 recommends creating a system of jointly used parks and outdoor classrooms. The River Center's multiple meeting spaces meet this function. The educational exhibits about the Los Angeles River include educational information about the river's natural resources.
- Provide opportunities for educational and public facilities: The River Center's multiple meeting spaces meet this function. The educational exhibits about the Los Angeles River include educational information about the river's natural resources.
- Focus attention on underused areas and disadvantaged communities: The River Center is located within a disadvantaged community. The California Department of Parks and Recreation's Community Fact Finder indicates that median household income of census tracts in proximity to the project is \$39,911, lower than the threshold of \$47,331 that DPR used to define a disadvantaged community.

Cornfield Arroyo Specific Plan, City of Los Angeles

The October 2012 draft *Cornfield Arroyo Specific Plan* (CASP) includes the River Center property as part of a new "Greenway Zone". The River Center's uses are consistent with those permitted for this zone, including "Conservation, Environmental and Social Service Organizations.

County of Los Angeles General Plan

The improvements to the River Center are compatible with the County of Los Angeles' *General Plan*, Conservation and Open Space Element by achieving the goal of preserving and protecting sites of scenic value. The plan also encourages high quality design in all development projects, compatible with and sensitive to the natural and manmade environment, and all of the work will achieve this.

Los Angeles River Master Plan

Adopted by the Los Angeles County Board of Supervisors in 1996, the Los Angeles River Master Plan was the first adopted planning document focused on the river corridor and the creation of a continuous greenway.

The project also implements and is compatible with the guiding principles of the Los Angeles River Master Plan. The following goals of the Plan are met by the proposed project:

■ Improve recreational opportunities along the river; ■ Improve community pride in the river: The improvements will result in increased public use of the River Center and its recreational resources. Increased community use of the River Center will expose more visitors to the educational exhibits about the Los Angeles River and create more exposure for the river-related non-profit organizations housed there.

Rim of the Valley Trail Corridor Master Plan, 1990

The project is within the Rim of the Valley (ROV) trail corridor. As an island of tree canopy separated from the river by industrial land, the River Center supports the ROV Master Plan's priority to provide connections between wildlife habitat areas. As part of the river access loop trail, the site supports the priority to protect the continuity and accessibility of the ROV trail.

Juan Bautista de Anza National Historical Trail

The National Park Service has a Congressionally-mandated plan to develop the Juan Bautista de Anza National Historical Trail. The River Center is located on the Anza Trail and contains an educational panel about the trail. Increased use of the River Center will expose more visitors to this resource.

Los Angeles River Center and Gardens Project Plan

adopted September 14, 1998, amended October 28, 1999, February 26, 2001, and October 20, 2008

Per Section 33209 of the Public Resources Code, every project submitted for funding to the Santa Monica Mountains Conservancy shall have an adopted project plan. The Los Angeles River Center and Gardens Project Plan was adopted by the Conservancy October 20, 2008. All of the improvements support the uses described in the Project Plan.

Santa Monica Mountains Conservancy Strategic Plan

Section VI(3) of the *Santa Monica Mountains Strategic Plan*, adopted in 1997, identifies the Conservancy's goals for the Los Angeles River. The improvements to the River Center property meet the following goals of the *Strategic Plan*.

■ Create 51 miles of continuous river parkway and greenbelt: The River Center has been included as a major stopping point/feature on the Los Angeles River

Greenway/Bikeway since it opened in 2000, and is part of a river access loop trail that connects to Confluence Park, the Bikeway, and the Metro Gold Line Cypress Park station.

- Develop recreation, park, trail and habitat restoration opportunities: The River Center's facilities are open to the public, including opportunities for passive recreation in the River Garden Park, and a Futsal court used for youth active recreation. Meeting rooms are available for public meetings at no charge. The proposed improvements would increase public access.
- Increase community involvement: Staff have worked with members of the local community to assist in developing the vision for the River Center which includes recreational and passive open space. Meeting facilities at the River Center are available for public programs at no or nominal charge. By performing work necessary to allow for the continued (and increased) use of the property and facilities, the proposed improvements will allow this to continue.
- Cooperate with local government and non-profit partners and maximize acquisition dollars by leveraging funds where appropriate: The River Center was originally acquired and opened to the public through a partnership of local and state agencies and funding sources. Several Los Angeles River related non-profit organizations are housed at the River Center, creating a convenient center for restoration and other efforts on the river. By performing work necessary to allow for the continued (and increased) use of the property and facilities, the proposed improvements will allow these partnerships to continue.

Consideration: The application to the Santa Monica Mountains Conservancy is for \$750,000 of Proposition 84 funds.