City of Arts & Innovation

City Council Memorandum

TO: **HONORABLE MAYOR AND CITY COUNCIL** **DATE: MAY 12, 2026**

FROM: **PARKS, RECREATION AND COMMUNITY SERVICES DEPARTMENT** **WARDS: 1, 3 & 7**

SUBJECT: **RIVER DISTRICT FEASIBILITY STUDY WORKPLAN**

ISSUE:

Adopt the River District Feasibility Study Workplan.

RECOMMENDATION:

That the City Council adopt the River District Feasibility Study Workplan.

BACKGROUND:

In 2003, the Santa Ana River Task Force was created, followed by a series of Mayor's Blue-Ribbon Committees throughout the Santa Ana Watershed.

In 2014, through Senate Bill 1390, the California state legislature created the Santa Ana River Conservancy Program within the State Coastal Conservancy. The program addresses the resource and recreational goals of the Santa Ana River region, including open space, trails, wildlife habitat, agricultural land protection, water quality protection, educational use, and public access. The Conservancy makes grant funding available to help agencies and non-profit organizations move forward with projects to meet these resource and recreational goals.

On March 14, 2018, the Coastal Conservancy approved the Santa Ana River Trail and Parkway Open Space Plan – 'Expanding the River's Reach'.

On December 26, 2019, the City of Riverside entered into a grant agreement with the California Coastal Conservancy for the Riverside Gateway Project Suite Design and CEQA project in the amount of $1,960,000. This planning effort received extensive community input concerning the design of 250 acres of undeveloped or underutilized City owned parkland that can serve as gateways to the river.

In June 2021, Mayor Patricia Lock Dawson created a Working Group, co-chaired by Ward 1 Councilmember, Erin Edwards and Ward 7 Councilmember, Steven Hemenway to determine methods of attracting: 1) City Investment; 2) Private Investment; and 3) Public Awareness. The Santa Ana River Working Group is comprised of dedicated community members and public service professionals who aspire to put the river back in Riverside. The group's purpose was to

identify opportunities for development along the Santa Ana River, provide recommendations on feasible projects, and suggest strategies for implementation. The group used the Design Thinking process to focus all discussions: What If, What Is, What Wows, and What Works.

On March 23, 2023, the City of Riverside posted the Request for Proposal to Planet Bids to procure a consultant to work on a River District Feasibility Study.

On April 6, 2023, the California State Coastal Conservancy approved and awarded the City of Riverside $200,000 for a feasibility study to assess the viability of establishing a River District along the Santa Ana River.

On October 10, 2023, the City Council approved professional consultant services agreement for Request for Proposal No. 2268 with Economic Consultants Oregon, Ltd. for River District Feasibility Study in the amount of $199,335.85 and adopted a resolution approving the acceptance of grant funds from the California State Coastal Conservancy for the Santa Ana River Riverside District Feasibility Study. The draft document is available online for public review and once all public comments are received and reviewed, the feasibility study will be finalized.

Economic Consultants Oregon, Ltd. facilitated a robust community input process through the community outreach meetings listed below.

On March 4, 2024, there was a meeting with the River District Stewardship Stakeholder Group including conservancies and other land management agencies.

On March 14, 2024, a meeting was held at the Armory to receive input from the community.

On July 29, 2024, River District Environmental Stakeholders, including non-profits, NGOs and public agencies met to discuss River Access.

On August 20, 2024, a meeting was held with stakeholders to explore River District Financing Structures and opportunities.

On September 10, 2024, the Indigenous People Convened at Riverside City Hall to discuss opportunities for collaboration.

On July 21, 2025, the Park and Recreation Commission received and filed an update on the River District Feasibility Study.

On October 28, 2025, the City Council received and filed an update on the River District Feasibility Study.

Since that time, input on the draft document has been received from the community through in-person meetings and social media postings. There were over 200 attendees at Fairmount Forward meetings, and seven posts and two reels were posted to the Parks, Recreation and Community Services Department social media accounts. The postings reached 85,000 followers, were viewed and liked by 1,500 followers, and over 100 comments were received providing insight into Fairmount Park. Minor edits and updates to the draft document were made from the community input received.

DISCUSSION:

The City of Riverside has embarked on an effort to 'Put the river back in Riverside' by creating the River District public realm that will be environmentally and fiscally sustainable and will better connect the community to the river. The California State Coastal Conservancy grant award for a feasibility study will allow the City to identify the boundaries of the River District, and define the resources needed to implement the Santa Ana River Task Force's vision for the River District. The grant is a first steppingstone for the development of the Santa Ana River District.

The desired outcomes of the River District include:

- Increasing Awareness and Excitement: Engage the community with marketing campaigns that showcase the potential of the River District as a safe and vibrant space to 'Put the River Back' in the minds of Riversiders.
- Improving Equity, Accessibility, and Inclusion: Amplify the voices of underrepresented groups and create opportunities for all Riversiders to participate in planning and enjoying the River District.
- Promoting Safety and Access: Address safety concerns with thoughtful design, programming, and cleanup efforts to create welcoming entry points and pathways to the river.

The "Put the River Back in Riverside" campaign focuses on community connection through creating economic vitality while honoring the stewardship of the lands and waters.

The River District will be built on four Pillars:

- Engagement: Public realm improvements need to be informed by the desires of the community. They need to reflect recreational demand and public safety. This includes those with fewer resources than others. The unhoused populations, some of whom live in the river bottom, are currently being engaged to offer services and transition them to permanent housing. Moving forward, the focus will be on public engagement including art, interpretation, and cultural representation.
- Enforcement: Many residents don't feel safe near the river. The River District enforcement will secure the public realm and make it a safe place for families to enjoy.
- Environment: There are extensive plans for habitat restoration in the river bottom and the responsible development of the Gateway Parks. The River District will be a truly sustainable public realm with distinctive design elements, plant palette, amenities, and wayfinding.
- Economics: The River District will be planned for financial sustainability and be a catalyst for public and private investment.

The River District is envisioned to be a financially sustainable district that supports the construction, operation, and maintenance of community safety and public amenities, with financial sustainability achieved through strong partnerships with private sector, nonprofit organizations, and public agencies, as well as the use of a diverse toolbox of financial strategies. It will also attract private development and serve as a self-generating district that invests fees and leases back into the district. Self-generating entity that attracts private investment to help fund public amenities.

Financial sustainability will be achieved through strong partnerships with the private sector and other non-profit organizations and public agencies and utilizing a toolbox of financial tools.

Environmental sustainability will also be achieved through strong partnerships. There are already extensive plans for habitat restoration in the river bottom and the responsible development of the Gateway Parks. The River District will be a truly sustainable public realm with a unique design, plant palate, amenities, and wayfinding.

Environmental challenges include:

- Trash
- Water quality
- Flood
- Erosion
- Invasive plants and animals
- Heat
- Fire

Environmental opportunities include:

- Resilience through climate adapted plants and shade
- Thoughtful restoration with native plants
- Reduce fire fuel by removing flammable invasive plants such as mustard and tumbleweed
- Increase awareness through education, volunteers, and community events

Creating a River District that endures for future generations means embedding sustainability and resilience into every aspect of its design and management. These strategies protect the environment and reduce long-term costs, and ensure the district remains a thriving space for all species.

People will know that they are in the River District because it will be anchored with sustainable and native landscape. It will be a place where not only people, but wildlife, will thrive. This will require tools and strategies to ensure the River District is built to and preserved with a goal toward environmental sustainability.

Environmentally sustainable strategies of a resilient River District:

- Materials that reduce fire fuel
- Use of local materials and native plants with low maintenance costs
- Use of native or climate adapted plant material
- Restore habitat, especially for endangered species
- Longevity of materials to reduce capital maintenance
- Onsite water capture
- Energy efficient facilities installations
- Design for resiliency to future conditions like fire and floods
- Minimizing or even restoring habitat impacts
- Community education and building a culture of stewardship
- Stormwater runoff filtering

A successful River District depends on the coordinated integration of four core elements:

- Build it: Improving parkland and restoring habitat
- Maintain it: Ensuring consistent, high-quality upkeep
- Program it: Providing activities and events for all
- Secure it: Protecting people and the environment

These factors work together to transform underutilized parkland into vibrant, accessible, and sustainable places.

Building the River District means activating the land with thoughtful design and habitat restoration; maintaining it ensures those investments endure for generations and have fiscal sustainability. Programming brings the space to life with events and activities that draw the community in, and securing the district protects its natural resources and guarantees a safe experience. To implement a successful River District with these core elements, the City and its partners will need to have resolve in their commitment to resources and funding for capital improvements, operations and maintenance, and community programming.

The River District will be a driver for economic growth, an example of sustainability, and a destination to be enjoyed by the community.

FISCAL IMPACT:

There is no direct fiscal impact associated with the adoption of this item. However, establishment and ongoing operation of the River District will depend on the availability of resources. Any costs associated with the recommended actions in the River District Feasibility Study Workplan would require subsequent City Council approval through supplemental appropriations or inclusion in the City's budget.

Approved by:	Pamela M. Galera, Parks, Recreation and Community Services Director
Certified as to availability of funds:	Julie Nemes, Interim Finance Director
Approved by:	Kris Martinez, Assistant City Manager
Approved as to form:	Rebecca McKee-Reimbold, Interim City Attorney

Attachments:

1. River District Feasibility Study Workplan
2. Presentation