

Memorandum

To : The Conservancy
The Advisory Committee

Date: June 3, 2013

From : 
Joseph T. Edmiston, FAICP, Hon. ASLA, Executive Director

Subject: **Agenda Item 14: Consideration of resolution authorizing a grant to the Mountains Recreation and Conservation Authority for project planning and design in the San Rafael Hills, Verdugo Mountains, and Northeast Los Angeles Open Space, including Arroyo Seco and Verdugo Wash.**

Staff Recommendation: That the Conservancy adopt the attached resolution authorizing a grant to the Mountains Recreation and Conservation Authority in the amount of \$55,000 for project planning and design in the San Rafael Hills, Verdugo Mountains, and Northeast Los Angeles Open Space, including Arroyo Seco and Verdugo Wash.

Legislative Authority: Sections 33204.2, 33204.27, and 75050(g)(2) of the Public Resources Code.

Background: The Mountains Recreation and Conservation Authority (MRCA) has submitted the attached application for a Project Planning and Design grant. The proposed grant would fund a continued effort to secure and develop land interests and public recreation resources in the Conservancy's jurisdiction, specifically in the San Rafael Hills, Verdugo Mountains, and Northeast Los Angeles Open Space, including Arroyo Seco and Verdugo Wash. The MRCA's Governing Board approved the grant request on May 1, 2013.

Objectives of the project planning and design grant are to plan land acquisitions and improvement projects to protect, restore, preserve, interpret and develop the land and water resources of the Upper Los Angeles River watershed, specifically in the San Rafael Hills, Verdugo Mountains, and Northeast Los Angeles Open Space, including Arroyo Seco and Verdugo Wash. Project planning and design describes a range of staff activities that prepare a potential project to the point that capital funding can be secured for implementation. In the case of land acquisition projects, the project planning and design effort extends throughout the escrow period. For capital improvement projects, project planning and design work extends through the completion of construction.

Recognition of the need to protect and preserve open space in this project area, and to maintain the distinctive characteristics of the landscapes, is reflected in various City planning documents including the Highland Park Historic Preservation Overlay Zone, the Northeast Los

Angeles Community Plan and Design Guidelines, and the Mt. Washington/Glassell Park Specific Plan.

The project is also consistent with the goals set forth in the UCLA Open Space Study of Northeast Los Angeles which inventoried area resources, identified the need for preservation, and made recommendations for enhancement. The primary goals identified were to preserve the natural environment, enhance the quality of life for residents and revitalize the community, and identify existing and future open space opportunities.

Additionally, the project area was studied and is identified in the Ecological Assessment of Open Space Remnants in Northeastern Los Angeles (Study) by Daniel Cooper in 2008. The Study reports on the results of a plant and wildlife survey and identifies areas which exhibit a “high degree of disturbance, but nonetheless support a natural community which has been widely lost in the region, including globally-rare species and habitats”. The Study specifies that although large areas have been protected as parkland in this region, significant unprotected parcels remain, nearly all of which are either currently threatened with imminent development or are currently being seriously degraded.

Analysis–Proposition 84 and the Common Ground Plan

Section 75050 of the Safe Drinking Water, Water Quality and Supply, Flood Control, River and Coastal Protection Bond Act of 2006 (Proposition 84), allocates funds to various entities “for the protection and restoration of rivers, lakes and streams, their watersheds and associated land, water, and other natural resources.” Section 75050 (g)(2) of the Act specifically allocates funding to the Santa Monica Mountains Conservancy “for implementation of watershed protection activities throughout the watershed of the Upper Los Angeles River pursuant to Section 79508 of the Water Code.” The section of the Water Code referenced therein states that watershed protection activities in the Los Angeles River shall be consistent with the *San Gabriel and Los Angeles Rivers Watershed and Open Space Plan*.

The proposed project planning and design grant constitutes watershed protection activities throughout the watershed of the Upper Los Angeles River. The geographic area covered by the grant is within the Upper Los Angeles River watershed, and the projects to be developed shall contain elements to protect and restore rivers, lakes and streams, their watersheds and associated land, water and other natural resources. The land acquisition and improvement projects that will be planned with the proposed project planning and design grant will be required to fit within the definitions of eligible activities: development, preservation, protection, interpretation, and/or restoration.

The project planning and design grant is consistent with the *San Gabriel and Los Angeles Rivers*

Watershed and Open Space Plan as required by Section 79508 of the Water Code. The *San Gabriel and Los Angeles Rivers Watershed and Open Space Plan*, also known as and hereinafter referred to as the "Common Ground" plan, was jointly developed by the San Gabriel and Lower Los Angeles Rivers and Mountains Conservancy and the Santa Monica Mountains Conservancy. The purpose of the plan is to "articulate a vision for the future of the San Gabriel and Los Angeles Rivers Watersheds" and "provide a framework for future watershed and open space planning." The plan outlines a holistic approach to watershed protection and development, organized by a set of Guiding Principles. These broad principles are designed to accommodate the varying priorities and needs of projects in the region.

Project planning and design of land acquisition and improvement projects in the San Rafael Hills, Verdugo Mountains, and Northeast Los Angeles Open Space, including Arroyo Seco and Verdugo Wash is consistent with the following Guiding Principles:

- Coordinate Watershed Planning Across Jurisdictions and Boundaries
- Encourage Multiple-Objective Planning and Projects
- Create, Expand and Improve Public Open Space Throughout the Region
- Connect Open Space with a Network of Trails
- Establish Riverfront Greenways to Cleanse Water, Hold Floodwaters, and Extend Open Space
- Improve Quality of Surface Water and Groundwater

To help guide decision making in watershed planning and project selection, the Common Ground plan includes a set of Project Evaluation Criteria (Appendix F), developed to help the agencies determine "regionally significant" park, trail, and restoration projects. The Evaluation Criteria identify a diverse set of values that a site might have, such as Open Space, Recreational Resources, Wildlife Resources, Access, *et cetera*. As new projects in the subject area are proposed and developed, they will be evaluated per these criteria. In this way, both the project planning and design grant, and the potential projects developed with these funds, are consistent with the Common Ground plan as required by Section 79508 of the Water Code.

In addition to evaluating consistency with the Common Ground plan, potential projects will be evaluated for consistency with other applicable plans, including the following:

- Santa Monica Mountains Conservancy Comprehensive Plan
- Rim of the Valley Trail Corridor Master Plan
- Juan Bautista de Anza National Historical Trail
- City of Los Angeles, Cornfield Arroyo Specific Plan
- County of Los Angeles General Plan

This project is also consistent with the Conservancy's Strategic Objectives to further cooperation with local Governments in the region to secure Open Space and Parkland and expand efforts to integrate nature into the urban environment.

Analysis - General Obligation Bond Law

The General Obligation Bond Law provides that bond funds may be used for the construction and acquisition of "capital assets." Capital assets include major maintenance, reconstruction, demolition for purposes of reconstruction of facilities, and retrofitting work that is ordinarily done no more often than once every 5 to 15 years or expenditures that continue or enhance the useful life of the capital asset (Government code Section 16727 (a)). Capital assets also includes equipment with an expected useful life of two years or more, and tangible physical property with an expected useful life of 10 to 15 years. Section 16727 (a) also allows bond funds to be used for costs that are incidentally but directly related to construction or acquisition including costs for planning, engineering and other design work.

The activities that MRCA proposes to fund with this grant constitute planning of land acquisitions and improvement projects to protect land and water resources, protect and restore rivers, lakes and streams, their watersheds and associated land, water and other natural resources. Thus, the proposed activities fall within the definition of "capital assets" or are incidentally but directly related to acquisition or construction, and therefore are proper under the General Obligation Bond Law.