

## Parks, bike trails and riverfront dining: The \$700 million plan to transform the San Diego River



(John Gibbins/The San Diego Union-Tribune)

By David Garrick

SAN DIEGO — The long-neglected San Diego River could become a regional attraction with recreational amenities and riverfront dining under a new financing plan recently endorsed by county and city officials.

Somewhere between \$380 million and \$750 million would be spent on new parks, bicycle bridges and flood-prevention projects that they hope will make private-sector investment more likely along the 52-mile river.

The projects could also reduce traffic congestion and greenhouse gas emissions by creating protected paths for bikers and walkers on both sides of the river, which runs from Julian through Lakeside, Santee, El Cajon, Grantville, Mission Valley and Ocean Beach.

County and city officials say they envision upgrades along the river having a positive impact similar to projects like the Belt Line in Atlanta, the High Line in New York City or the San Antonio River Walk.

Money for the upgrades would come from a relatively new state funding source that doesn't require a tax increase and wouldn't take away from money the county and city spend on firefighting, libraries or other key services.

County and city officials say they both plan to create enhanced infrastructure financing districts that would get money any time a parcel within half a mile of the river sees its property tax go up in the next 45 years.

The two government agencies could wait for those increases, called tax increment, to accumulate over time. But officials say they prefer to get many millions in immediate cash by selling bonds against the projected increment.

That money would dramatically accelerate slow and ongoing efforts to upgrade the river, where a master plan already envisions 130 miles of trails and parks once both sides of the waterway and adjacent areas are combined.

"We're aiming to do something big and bold with this plan," said Councilmember Raul Campillo, who has spearheaded the new collaboration on the city side. "Every major city that has a river has used it as an asset."

While Campillo said the public investment will bring more benches, clear brush and help eliminate invasive species along the river, he said the impact on private investment could matter even more. "When we put in the infrastructure to make the river a clean and safe place to be around, property owners will take their own steps," he said.

Instead of developers orienting commercial and housing projects with their backs to the river, new projects might face the river and treat it as an amenity, he said.

An example could be the long-term redevelopment of the Fashion Valley mall, which could become a commercial project focused on the river.

County Supervisor Nathan Fletcher, who has led the effort on the county side, said progress on the river has been slow only because there hasn't been a dedicated funding stream.

A detailed master plan has been in place since 2013, and a comprehensive plan for trails along the river was completed in 2020.

"It's not for lack of seeing the trail, and it's not for lack of seeing the purpose. It really is at this point a lack of dedicated, sustained funding," Fletcher said. "Absent a real catalyst to change the trajectory, this could take another 100 years to finish."

The new collaboration between city and county comes with momentum behind upgrading the river already strong.

San Diego State University will build a large river park as part of its new western campus on the former site of Qualcomm Stadium. And ground will soon be broken on an 18-acre river park with an educational center between Qualcomm Way and Interstate 805.

But county officials estimate somewhere between \$271 million and \$668 million is needed to

complete the long-term vision for the river and its adjacent trails. Most of that, between \$200 million and \$488 million, would be used to buy land from private owners.

Only about 50 miles — roughly 40 percent — of the envisioned trail network along the river has been completed.

A consultant hired by the county last year explored several ways to generate enough money to complete the park quickly, including a sales tax increase and a general obligation bond that would raise regional property taxes.

The Board of Supervisors voted unanimously last month to choose instead an enhanced infrastructure financing district, or EIFD. But the vote specified that the county would only move forward with an EIFD if the city followed suit.

On Thursday, the City Council's Environment Committee unanimously endorsed pursuing an EIFD.

"County government should not build this alone, city government should not build this alone — this really ought to be a collaborative effort, and that's where I see the tremendous value of an EIFD," Fletcher said.

Officials from both agencies said another element of their partnership would be a new pact to address homeless encampments along the river that could keep visitors away despite the new amenities.

"The river is not an amenity at the moment," said Dike Anyiwo, chair of the Midway Community Planning Group, which focuses on the western end of the river near the sports arena and Ocean Beach.

Anyiwo said many people have no idea the river runs through the Midway district, and he said people who do know about the river are typically scared to go near it because of homeless encampments.

There are two compelling reasons to create an EIFD at the western end of the river, he said: the need for better transportation options in the Midway area, and the fact that so much new development anticipated there could generate significant tax increment.

Large housing projects and a new arena and entertainment district are expected to be built in the area and spur additional nearby projects.

New bike paths, pedestrian bridges and other infrastructure along the river could help complete the city's new mobility network.

"Right now, the San Diego River is the largest barrier to active transportation in San Diego," said Will Rhatigan, advocacy director for the San Diego County Bicycle Coalition.

He said more bridges are needed over the river, stressing that existing bridges create a dangerous mix because they are also open to cars and lack protected bike lanes.

Upgrading the river could also unite neighborhoods now divided by freeways by connecting them with new trails and paths, said County Supervisor Terra Lawson-Remer.

"I've never really understood why our elected leaders haven't invested in the river — it's beautiful and it runs through the heart of our community," she said. "Everyone is biking and running and walking and playing on the rivers that run through the hearts of other towns. We could do so much better in San Diego."

County officials said Santee community leaders have expressed support for the new collaboration, but that Santee is unlikely to create its own EIFD because the city has completed most of the projects along the river that it has planned.

EIFDs are often called "redevelopment light," because they were created by state lawmakers in 2015 as a replacement for redevelopment agencies, which were eliminated in 2012.

An EIFD relies on tax increment just like a redevelopment agency did, but an EIFD gets to keep a smaller portion of the increment. School districts, which lost property tax increment to redevelopment agencies, get to keep that increment under the EIFD law.

Roughly two dozen EIFDs have been created across California, including one created by San Diego in Otay Mesa. Additional EIFDs have been discussed recently for the redevelopment of Seaport Village and projects near the sports arena.

### New focus on San Diego River's future

A city-county financing plan could raise \$700M to dramatically accelerate efforts to upgrade the 52-mile river, which could become a regional attraction with recreational amenities and riverfront dining.

— Completed trail — Planned trail



Sources: San Diego County; OpenStreetMap

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