



October 2, 2019

Governor's Office of Planning & Research

**OCT 02 2019**

**STATE CLEARINGHOUSE**

Ms. Laura Shinn  
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**Subject: Comments on the Availability of a Draft Environmental Impact Report for the San Diego State University Mission Valley Campus Master Plan Project, San Diego, CA (SCH# 2019011042)**

Dear Ms. Shinn:

The California Department of Fish and Wildlife (Department) has reviewed the above-referenced Draft Environmental Impact Report (DEIR) for the San Diego State University Mission Valley Campus Master Plan Project, dated August 2019. The following statements and comments have been prepared pursuant to the Department's authority as Trustee Agency with jurisdiction over natural resources affected by the project (California Environmental Quality Act, [CEQA] Guidelines §15386) and pursuant to our authority as a Responsible Agency under CEQA Guidelines section 15381 over those aspects of the proposed project that come under the purview of the California Endangered Species Act (CESA; Fish and Game Code § 2050 *et seq.*) and Fish and Game Code section 1600 *et seq.* The Department also administers the Natural Community Conservation Planning (NCCP) program. While we acknowledge that San Diego State University (SDSU) is not signatory to a NCCP, the City of San Diego (City) participates in the NCCP program by implementing its approved Multiple Species Conservation Program (MSCP) Subarea Plan (SAP).

The project site is located within the existing footprint of the San Diego County Credit Union Stadium property located south of Friars Road, west of Interstate 15, north of the San Diego River, and west of Murphy Canyon Creek. San Diego State University (SDSU) proposes to purchase the project area from the City, demolish the existing stadium, and develop a Mission Valley Campus. The Mission Valley Campus is composed of 1.6 million square feet (sf) of campus buildings, a new 35,000-seat collegiate stadium, 4,600 residences, a hotel, 95,000 sf of retail space, on- and off-site infrastructure, and approximately 86 acres of green space. The green space, located along the southern and easterly boundaries of the project area, would include active and passive parks, hiking/biking trails, recreational fields, and open space. The City would remain the owner the approximately 34-acre River Park after it is developed by SDSU, per San Diego Municipal Code Section 22.0908.

The Department has identified biological resource issues that are of concern. Specifically, the Department is concerned for the potential direct and indirect impacts to the San Diego River and Murphy Canyon Creek, and potential impacts to wildlife corridor functionality and flora and fauna therein. We offer the following comments and recommendations to assist SDSU in avoiding or minimizing potential project impacts on biological resources.

1. The DEIR states that recreational sports fields within the River Park will be "...located a minimum of 100 feet from the [City Multi Habitat Planning Area (MHPA)] in order to

minimize indirect impacts such as noise” (page 4.3-32); however, the DEIR also states that River Park uses “...are conceptual and may be revised by more precise site planning conducted through the public outreach process” (page 2-17). The Department would like to reemphasize the importance of riparian buffers.

Based on the proximity of the San Diego River corridor, any redevelopment project should recognize the importance of adequately sized and appropriately managed buffers for protecting riparian habitat. Riparian buffers serve numerous functions for riparian habitat and the species they support, including: (a) expansion of the habitat’s biological values (e.g., buffers are an integral part of the complex riparian ecosystems that provide food and habitat for the fish and wildlife they support); (b) protection from direct disturbance by humans and domestic animals; and (c) reduction of edge effects from, for example, artificial noise and light, line-of-sight disturbances, invasive species, and anthropogenic nutrients and sediments (streams should not be burdened by anthropogenic pollutants which often represent levels beyond their natural assimilative capacity). In determining the adequate buffer width, as measured from the outside edge of the riparian habitat, it is necessary to consider that edge effects can penetrate up to 650 feet into habitat. The Fish and Game Commission Policy on the Retention of Wetland Acreage and Habitat states, “Buffers should be of sufficient width and should be designed to eliminate potential disturbance of fish and wildlife resources from noise, human activity, feral animal intrusion, and any other potential sources of disturbance<sup>1</sup>.”

The City’s MSCP SAP identifies the San Diego River corridor as a habitat linkage (riparian habitat and adjacent upland vegetation communities in proximity to the redevelopment proposal are within the Multi-Habitat Planning Area [MHPA]). The City has previously acknowledged (e.g., Grantville Redevelopment Project [SCH# 2004071122]) that, “the San Diego River riparian habitat and adjacent Diegan coastal sage scrub are still areas of relatively high species diversity and abundance and provide a regional wildlife corridor” between Mission Trails Park and Mission Bay Park, and that, “...these habitats and linkages are crucial for wildlife species survival and reproduction within the Redevelopment Area and surrounding region.” The above statements remain applicable for SDSU’s project proposal, especially in light of the City’s ownership of the Riverwalk parcel of the project site, and therefore the Department encourages SDSU to focus on protecting the biological resources associated with the San Diego River corridor by including design features that provide an enlarged biological buffer along the affected areas of the San Diego River<sup>2</sup>.

The Department recommends that the project include a minimum 100-foot wetland buffer in order to comply with the Biology Guidelines and the MSCP conditions of coverage for least Bell’s vireo (*Vireo bellii pusillus*: vireo). Any proposal for the placement of public trails (if applicable) within the upland buffer should be kept to a

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<sup>1</sup> <http://www.fgc.ca.gov/policy/p4misc.aspx#WETLANDS>

<sup>2</sup> The Department has commented on development proposals along the San Diego River where it emphasized the importance of providing adequate wetland buffers in relation to the development footprint (e.g., Shawnee/CG7600 Master Plan, Grantville Redevelopment Project, Grantville Master Plan, Draft San Diego River Natural Resource Management Plan [NRMP], and San Diego River Park Master Plan) These comments are available upon request.

minimum. Any buffer areas not already within the MHPA should be added to it and managed accordingly.

Although the Department may recommend a buffer greater than 100 feet for other, more sensitive areas along the River, we believe that 100 feet is a reasonable minimum for this portion of the San Diego River. We request confirmation that active and recreational uses will remain located at least 100 feet from the MHPA.

2. According to the Project Description, there are no planned improvements for Murphy Canyon Creek, which currently flows through a concrete box channel. Aerials taken before the construction of the current stadium (i.e., prior to 1966, see <http://historicaerials.com>) show the San Diego River occupying a considerable portion of the stadium property, sweeping north and then west through the area of the current stadium in a wide, braided system. Murphy Canyon Creek can be seen running in a southwesterly direction, entering the San Diego River west of the current confluence. In order to accommodate installation of the fill pad on which the current stadium and parking lot are located, Murphy Canyon Creek was relocated to the eastern property line, and the San Diego River was channelized and relocated to the southern edge of the property.

As in our letter to the City on July 20, 2015 (Stadium Reconstruction Project [SCH No. 2015061061]), the Department encourages SDSU to consider returning Murphy Canyon Creek to a more natural configuration as part of project activities, which will allow the San Diego River channel to occupy a greater area. If this is infeasible, consideration should be given that development associated with the project be located such that it does not preclude future restoration of Murphy Canyon Creek and the San Diego River to nearer their historic conditions. The development footprint should be outside the River Corridor Area, described in the San Diego Municipal Code as the 100-year floodway as mapped by the Federal Emergency Management Agency plus a 35-foot wide area on each side of the floodway<sup>3</sup>.

3. Mitigation Measure MM-BIO-13 describes permits necessary for temporary and permanent impacts to riparian habitats along with proposed mitigation ratios. The EIR should include a discussion of riparian impacts and mitigation ratios in relationship to the City's MHPA; if direct riparian impacts are to occur within the MHPA, appropriate mitigation per the City's MSCP SAP should also be included in the EIR. Beyond concern for general impacts to MHPA, the Department has concern that the project's riparian impacts may occur within a Streambed Alteration Agreement (SAA) mitigation area which is currently in its second-of-five-year creation/restoration plan (City of San Diego, Stadium Wetland Mitigation Project, SAA 1600-2014-0192-R5). The EIR should analyze if the project would directly or indirectly impact an existing mitigation site. The adequacy of mitigation ratios proposed within the DEIR will be evaluated on these and additional factors at the time the project applicant formally submits a streambed notification package to the Department's Lake and Streambed Alteration Program.

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<sup>3</sup> San Diego Municipal Code; Chapter 15, Article 14, Division 3, pages 6 and 7: Planned Districts, §1514.0302 (a) and Diagram 1514-03A San Diego River Park Subdistrict Components.

4. The Department acknowledges that mitigation measure MM-BIO-8 prohibits the planting of invasive plant species and those species that require excessive irrigation. The Department encourages SDSU to specifically include native plants in the landscaped areas adjacent to the MHPA/biological buffer. Use of native plants in landscaping not only minimizes the spread of invasive plant species, which are detrimental to adjacent open space, but also provides additional benefits such as the attraction of native pollinators and further reduced water consumption. The Department requests that the EIR include the plant palette which will be used for project landscaping.

We appreciate the opportunity to comment on the DEIR for this project and to assist SDSU in further minimizing and mitigating project impacts to biological resources. We request that a written response to our comments be provided in the EIR, as required per CEQA Guidelines section 15088(d). If you have any questions or comments regarding this letter, please contact Jennifer Turner of the Department at (858) 467-2717 or [jennifer.turner@wildlife.ca.gov](mailto:jennifer.turner@wildlife.ca.gov).

Sincerely,



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Environmental Program Manager  
South Coast Region

ec: Patrick Gower, U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service  
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