

## Progress made on river path

Another mile added to long-awaited walkway

By **Julia Love**

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Photo by [Sean Haffey](#) San Diego Union-Tribune

A bike-and-pedestrian path along the San Diego River in Mission Valley has now been extended from Dog Beach east to Hotel Circle. Supporters hope the path will generate greater appreciation for the waterway. - SEAN M. HAFHEY / Union-Tribune

Bicyclists and runners used the new portion of the path along the San Diego River. It is among the first major projects completed by the San Diego River Conservancy.

MISSION VALLEY — One mile down, 39 to go.

A new bike-and-pedestrian path through a section of Mission Valley is just one mile long. But legislators and environmentalists say the completion of the walkway two weeks ago represents a major milestone in the quest to create a trail stretching the length of the San Diego River, from Julian to Ocean Beach.

Supporters hope the path will generate greater appreciation for the waterway.

“People drive by all the time and just don't even realize the river is there,” said Kathy Keehan, executive director of the San Diego City Bike Coalition, an organization that has lobbied for the trail. “Now we're

seeing a lot of people who are like, 'Oh, there's a river!' Hopefully they'll grow to love the river like we do.”

The project was initially slated for completion last June. But Jamal Batta, senior civil engineer with San Diego's Department of Engineering and Capital Projects, said that obtaining the necessary permits from the California Department of Transportation, the San Diego Metropolitan Transit System and North County Transit District kept the final 5 percent of the path from completion.

“We were really hoping that it would go faster than it did . . . but now that it's done we're very pleased with the project,” Keehan said.

The trail is among the first major projects completed by the San Diego River Conservancy, which contributed \$2 million toward the \$3 million construction cost. Now the conservancy has shifted its focus to forging other paths along the San Diego River.

Mike Nelson, the conservancy's executive director, said he has secured funding for trails where the San Diego River meets the River Gorge in Cleveland National Forest, Riverford Road in Lakeside and Mast Park in Santee. Designs have been completed, and Nelson said he is optimistic that construction will begin within the next six months.

Nelson said the conservancy also hopes to break ground on a path between Fashion Valley mall and Hazard Center, though funds for the project have been suspended by the state.

The network of trails is a central component of the San Diego River Park, a planned chain of riverfront recreation spaces that would enhance the relationship between the waterway and neighboring communities.

Officials hope the River Park will eventually stretch the 52-mile length of the San Diego River. The completion of the newest path brings the total to 13 paved miles.

A draft of the San Diego River Park Master Plan, a document that will guide the development of the trail and recreation spaces, will be distributed to community members for input in late fall, Robin Shifflet, a park designer assigned to the master plan, wrote in an e-mail. The San Diego Planning Department hopes to present the plan to the City Council late next year.

But construction on the River Park can proceed only if there is enough money – something that is far from being a sure thing in the current economic climate. The conservancy hoped to have raised \$164.5 million for projects along the river by the end of the year, according to its strategic plan, but Nelson said the group is not on pace to reach that goal.

The River Conservancy has been working with the San Diego River Coalition, an organization of 70 community groups that is also trying to get the beach-to-mountain path completed.

“That's what's sometimes frustrating, when you have so much community support and you don't have every dollar that you need to get it done,” Nelson said. “As long as we can continue to leverage the

energy and enthusiasm of those 70 organizations, it's safe to say that the River Park will continue to build momentum.”

The newest section, a 10-foot-wide bikeway topped with porous concrete and designed with erosion control in mind, has been carefully constructed to protect the environment.

Officials hope the Ocean Beach Bike Path/Hotel Circle North Bikeway – which bridges bustling Hotel Circle and the coast – will ease traffic by giving visitors the option to bike to their destination, rather than brave congested streets.

Nelson noted that the River Park is in line with the San Diego Association of Governments' Regional Transportation Plan, possibly providing a novel source of additional funding. He said he has had several conversations with SANDAG leaders about whether the projects along the river could qualify for the association's funding in addition to “the traditional bond sources.”

“It becomes more than just a bike path and becomes a transportation corridor for people to get to work,” Nelson said.

For decades, the river was considered a nuisance by developers constructing buildings adjacent to the waterway, said Richard Dhu, a project manager for the San Diego River Park Foundation.

“The river has been neglected for years,” he said. “The buildings are built with their backs turned to the river, as opposed to celebrating it. Instead of turning our back to the river and trying to close it off, we should try to open it up and connect it.”

Champions of the project are confident the trail will reach from the waterway's headwaters near Julian to the Pacific Ocean someday.

But, while taking a breather from exercising on the path, Donna Boss, 53, said she is satisfied with the length of the path as is.

Fifty-two miles, she said with a laugh, “would be a little bit too far for me. I'm too old for that.”

*Julia Love is a Union-Tribune intern.*

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