

1.0 INTRODUCTION

1.1 SUMMARY OF THE PROPOSED PROJECT

This Environmental Impact Report (EIR) has been prepared by the San Gabriel River Discovery Center Authority (Authority) to evaluate potential environmental effects that may result from development of the proposed San Gabriel River Discovery Center at Whittier Narrows (Discovery Center or proposed project). This EIR has been prepared in conformance with the California Environmental Quality Act of 1970 (CEQA) statutes (Cal. Pub. Res. Code, Section 21000 et. seq., as amended) and implementing guidelines (Cal. Code Regs., Title 14, Section 15000 et. seq.). The Authority is the Lead Agency under CEQA. The Authority is a Joint Powers Authority (JPA) consisting of the following agencies:

- Upper San Gabriel Valley Municipal Water District
- Central Basin Municipal Water District
- County of Los Angeles Department of Parks and Recreation (LADPR)
- San Gabriel and Lower Los Angeles Rivers and Mountains Conservancy (RMC)

The proposed project site is owned in part by LADPR and the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers (USACE). As an underlying property owner, the USACE is preparing an Environmental Assessment (EA) for this project under the National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA). The NEPA and CEQA processes are being undertaken concurrently for this project in separate environmental documents.

The 11.3-acre project site (or lease boundary) is located at 1000 North Durfee Avenue in an unincorporated portion of Los Angeles County within the Whittier Narrows Recreation Area (Recreation Area) adjacent to the City of South El Monte. The Whittier Narrows Nature Center (WNNC) is presently located within the lease boundary, and includes a museum, gift shop, library, outbuildings, and 33-car parking lot (with 2 handicapped spaces) and 2 bus parking spaces. The County Police do not use the WNNC parking spaces for County or personal vehicles; instead, they park near the maintenance garage.

The proposed project would replace the WNNC with an interpretive center. The primary project features include an 18,230 square foot (sf) interpretive center, a 150-car parking lot with a bus drop-off area to accommodate 3 buses (approximately 160 sf in length), a maintenance building, an open air classroom, a constructed riparian/wetland area, a covered outdoor classroom, and paved walkways from the interpretive center to the parking lot and connecting to existing unpaved trails and roads. The interpretive center would include a lobby, exhibit areas, classrooms, support facilities, and administrative offices. Access to the interpretive center would be provided at a new driveway location on the south side of Durfee Avenue adjacent to the building. The interpretive center would be constructed to meet the U.S. Green Building Council's Leadership in Energy and Environmental Design (LEED) Platinum standards, which would increase the efficiency of energy, water, and building material use on-site. Project construction would involve disturbance of approximately 7 acres (construction impact area) within the

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11.3-acre area owned by the USACE, leased by LADPR, and sublet to the Authority (herein referred to as the lease boundary). Approximately 4.3 acres would be set aside of native habitat restoration/preservation.

As previously mentioned, the lease boundary is located within the Recreation Area, in the 300-acre portion of called the Whittier Narrows Natural Area (Natural Area). Thus, surrounding land uses include open space and recreation areas to the south, east, and west. The lease boundary abuts the boundaries of the City of South El Monte to the north and the west. South El Monte High School is located directly north of the lease boundary across Durfee Avenue. A commercial building directly abuts the lease boundary to the west. A mix of industrial and multi-family residential uses is located farther west along Durfee Avenue. The San Gabriel River is located approximately 0.25 mile south of the lease boundary, and is not part of the lease boundary.

1.2 THE CEQA ENVIRONMENTAL PROCESS

CEQA requires preparation of an EIR when there is substantial evidence supporting a fair argument that a project may have a significant effect on the environment. The purpose of an EIR is to provide decision makers, public agencies, and the general public with an objective and informational document that fully discloses the environmental effects of the proposed project. The EIR process is intended to facilitate the objective evaluation of potentially significant direct, indirect, and cumulative impacts of the proposed project, and to identify feasible mitigation measures and alternatives that would reduce or avoid the project's significant effects. In addition, CEQA specifically requires that an EIR identify those adverse impacts determined to be significant after mitigation.

In accordance with the CEQA Guidelines, an Initial Study was prepared and a Notice of Preparation distributed on August 31, 2006, to public agencies and organizations as well as private organizations and individuals with a possible interest in the proposed project. The purpose of the Notice of Preparation was to provide notification that the lead agency (Authority) plans to prepare an EIR and to solicit input on the scope and contents of the EIR. Over 170 copies of the Notice of Preparation were distributed; seven written comment letters were received from various agencies, organizations, and individuals. These letters and the Notice of Preparation are included in Appendix A of this EIR.

A public agency scoping meeting was held on September 27, 2006, for the proposed project. The scoping meeting introduced the proposed project and alternatives, outlined the environmental review process, and invited public comment on the content of the environmental review. Approximately ten citizens attended the meeting, and six people spoke at the meeting to express their concerns regarding the potential environmental effects of the proposed project. Through this process, several key issues and areas of controversy were identified, including:

- Public access to the proposed project site, including access for bicyclists and equestrians;
- Impacts to existing vegetation along Durfee Avenue;

- Need for a westbound right turn-lane on Durfee Avenue into the proposed project site;
- Impacts to birds and raptors that have been seen on-site;
- Preservation of existing native vegetation located on-site; and
- Effects of the constructed wetland on the hydrology of the proposed project site and the San Gabriel River.

This EIR focuses on the environmental impacts identified as potentially significant during the Initial Study process, including the comments received in response to the Notice of Preparation. The issue areas analyzed in detail in this EIR include aesthetics, air quality, biological resources, cultural resources, hydrology and water quality, noise, and transportation and circulation. Effects not found to be significant are addressed in Section 4.2 of this EIR.

This Draft EIR is being circulated for 60 days for public review and comment. The timeframe of the public review period is identified in the Notice of Availability attached to this Draft EIR. During this period, comments from the general public, organizations, and agencies regarding environmental issues analyzed in the Draft EIR and the Draft EIR's accuracy and completeness may be submitted to the lead agency at the following address:

San Gabriel River Discovery Center Authority
100 North Old San Gabriel Canyon Road
Azusa, CA 91702
Contact: Valorie Shatynski, Project Manager
Email: vshatynski@rmc.ca.gov
Phone: (626) 815-1019 ext. 114

General questions about this EIR and the EIR process should also be directed to the phone number above. The Authority will prepare written responses to comments to all comments pertaining to environmental issues raised in the Draft EIR if they are submitted in writing and postmarked by the last day of the public review period identified in the Notice of Availability.

Prior to approval of the proposed project, the Authority, as the lead agency and decision-making entity, is required to certify that this EIR has been completed in accordance with CEQA, that the proposed project has been reviewed and the information in this EIR has been considered, and that this EIR reflects the independent judgment of the Authority. CEQA also requires the Authority to adopt "findings" with respect to each significant environmental effect identified in the EIR) (Pub. Res. Code, Section 21081; Cal. Code Regs., Title 14, Section 15091). For each significant effect, CEQA requires the approving agency to make one or more of the following findings:

- The proposed project has been altered to avoid or substantially lessen significant impacts identified in the Final EIR.
- The responsibility to carry out such changes or alterations is under the jurisdiction of another agency.

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- Specific economic, legal, social, technological, or other considerations, including provision of employment opportunities for highly trained workers, make infeasible the mitigation measures or project alternatives identified in the Final EIR.

If the Authority concludes that the proposed project will result in significant effects, which are identified in this EIR but are not substantially lessened or avoided by feasible mitigation measures and alternatives, the Authority must adopt a “statement of overriding considerations” prior to approval of the proposed project (Pub. Res. Code, Section 21081). Such statements are intended under CEQA to provide a written means by which the lead agency balances in writing the benefits of the proposed project and the significant and unavoidable environmental impacts. Where the lead agency concludes that the economic, legal, social, technological, or other benefits outweigh the unavoidable environmental impacts, the lead agency may find such impacts “acceptable” and approve the proposed project.

In addition, public agencies, when approving a project, must also adopt a mitigation monitoring and reporting program (MMRP) describing the changes that were incorporated into the proposed project or made a condition of project approval in order to mitigate or avoid significant effects on the environment (Pub. Res. Code Section 21081.6). The MMRP is adopted at the time of project approval and is designed to ensure compliance during project implementation. Upon approval of the proposed project, the Authority will be responsible for implementation of the proposed project’s mitigation monitoring and reporting program.

1.3 ORGANIZATION OF THE EIR

This Draft EIR is organized as follows:

The **Executive Summary** of this EIR provides an overview of the information provided in detail in subsequent chapters. It consists of an introduction; a description of the proposed project and alternatives considered; a discussion of areas of controversy and issues to be resolved; and a table that summarizes the potential environmental impacts in each category, the significance determination for those impacts, mitigation measures, and significance after mitigation.

Chapter 1.0 of this EIR provides a brief description and purpose of the proposed project. It includes an overview of the CEQA environmental review process and a section describing the organization of the EIR.

Chapter 2.0 of this EIR provides a detailed description of the proposed project. Project objectives are identified, and information on the proposed project characteristics, conceptual facility layout and design, and construction scenario is provided. This section also includes a description of the intended uses of the EIR and public agency actions.

Chapter 3.0 of this EIR describes the potential environmental effects of implementing the proposed project. The discussion in Chapter 3.0 is organized by seven environmental issue areas, as follows:

- Aesthetics
- Air Quality
- Biological Resources
- Cultural Resources
- Hydrology and Water Quality
- Noise
- Transportation/Circulation

For each environmental issue, the analysis and discussion are organized into five subsections as described below:

Environmental Setting - This subsection describes, from a local and regional perspective, the physical environmental conditions in the vicinity of the proposed project at the time of publication of the NOP in August 2006. The environmental setting establishes the baseline conditions by which the Authority will determine whether specific project-related impacts are significant.

Significance Criteria – This subsection identifies a set of significance criteria for determining whether an impact would be considered significant.

Environmental Impacts - This subsection provides detailed information on the environmental effects of the proposed project, and whether the impacts of the proposed project would meet or exceed the established significance criteria.

Mitigation Measures - This subsection identifies potentially feasible mitigation measures that would avoid or substantially reduce significant adverse project-related impacts.

Significance after Mitigation - This subsection indicates whether project-related impacts would be reduced to below a level of significance with implementation of the mitigation measures identified in the EIR. This subsection also identifies any residual significant and unavoidable adverse effects of the proposed project that would result even after the mitigation measures have been implemented.

Chapter 4.0 of this EIR presents the other mandatory CEQA sections, including the following:

Unavoidable Significant Adverse Impacts - This subsection identifies and summarizes the unavoidable significant impacts described in detail in Chapter 3.0.

Effects Not Found to Be Significant - This subsection identifies and summarizes the environmental impacts that were found not to be significant.

Cumulative Impacts - This subsection addresses the significant cumulative impacts that may result from the proposed project when taking into account other past, present, and reasonably foreseeable future projects.

Irreversible Environmental Changes - This subsection addresses the extent to which the proposed project would result in the commitment of nonrenewable resources.

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Growth-Inducing Impacts - This subsection describes the potential of the proposed project to induce economic or population growth or the construction of additional housing, either directly or indirectly, in the surrounding environment.

Chapter 5.0 of this EIR describes and evaluates the comparative merits of a reasonable range of alternatives to the proposed project that would feasibly attain most of the basic objectives of the proposed project and avoid or substantially lessen potentially significant project-related impacts. The chapter also describes the preliminary site constraints analysis and rationale for selecting the range of alternatives discussed in the EIR and identifies the alternatives considered by the Authority that were rejected from further discussion as infeasible during the scoping process. Chapter 5.0 also includes a discussion of the environmental effects of the No Project Alternative and identifies the environmentally superior alternative.

Chapter 6.0 provides a list of acronyms and abbreviations used in this EIR.

Chapter 7.0 provides a bibliography of reference materials used in preparation of this EIR.

Chapter 8.0 identifies those persons responsible for preparation of this EIR.