

# CHAPTER 1.0

## INTRODUCTION

This Final Environmental Impact Report (EIR) has been prepared by the San Gabriel River Discovery Center Authority (Authority) under the California Environmental Quality Act of 1970 (CEQA) Guidelines Sections 15088, 15089, and 15132, for the proposed San Gabriel River Discovery Center at Whittier Narrows (Discovery Center or proposed project). This Final EIR includes: Chapter 2.0 Clarifications and Modifications, which describes the changes made to the Draft EIR; and Chapter 3.0 Response to Comments, which includes the Authority's responses to all comments received by agencies, private organizations, and the public during the 60-day public comment period. 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)

### 1.1 SUMMARY OF PROPOSED PROJECT

The basic objective of the proposed project is to operate an interpretive center to educate the general and school-age population within a 25-mile radius of the project site about the San Gabriel River watershed at one accessible location that integrates indoor and outdoor exhibits and interpretive features.

The proposed project site is owned in part by County of Los Angeles and the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers (USACE). The approximately 11.21-acre project site (or lease boundary) is located at 1000 North Durfee Avenue. The proposed project site consists of an approximately 0.63-acre County-owned parcel located in the City of South El Monte, and approximately 10.58 acres of adjacent federal land located in an unincorporated portion of Los Angeles County within the Whittier Narrows Recreation Area (Recreation Area). 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 handicap spaces) and 2 bus parking spaces.

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 covered outdoor classroom, a constructed riparian/wetland area, and paved walkways from the interpretive center to the parking lot and connecting to existing trails network in the adjacent Whittier Narrows Natural Area (Natural Area). 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 interpretive center main building. The interpretive center main building 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 approximately 11.21-acre area owned by the USACE, leased by LADPR, and sublet to the Authority (herein referred to as the lease boundary). Approximately 8 acres would be set aside of native habitat restoration/preservation.

The federally owned portion of the lease boundary is located within the Whittier Narrows Recreation Area (Recreation Area), in the 300-acre portion of called the Natural Area. Surrounding land uses include open space and recreation areas to the south, east, and 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 PROJECT OBJECTIVES

The basic objective of the proposed project is to operate an interpretive center to educate the general and school-age population within a 25-mile radius of the project site about the San Gabriel River watershed at one accessible location that integrates indoor and outdoor exhibits and interpretive features. The following specific objectives further this basic objective:

- 1. Create an accessible interpretive center set in a unique regional setting, designed to educate the public about the San Gabriel River watershed through a combination of indoor exhibits, outdoor interpretive features, and educational programming.**

*Explanation:* The proposed project would provide a site where a comprehensive educational program about the watershed can be displayed in a single facility. The site and interpretive center together would deliver a program about all aspects of watershed education: geologic setting, natural history, water quality and conservation, human reliance on river resources, flood management, and river restoration. The watershed message would be presented in a single, comprehensive interpretive center that would lead visitors through each these topics utilizing multiple learning modes intended to appeal to a diverse regional urban audience. In order to meet project objectives, indoor exhibit design would link with and encourage visitors to experience the interpretive center grounds, where they can experience physical examples or regional watershed features illustrating concepts described in the indoor exhibits.

- 2. Provide an interpretive center that accommodates the K-12 school districts located within a 25-mile radius of the project site by providing standards-based grade-level appropriate educational programming through a wide range of accessible and free exhibits, classroom space, and hands-on outdoor experiences.**

*Explanation:* Currently, the Whittier Narrows Nature Center is estimated to serve approximately 9,600 school children annually.<sup>1</sup> One of the primary objectives of the San Gabriel River Discovery Center Authority is to develop a new interpretive center in order to increase accessibility and appropriate programming to reach 18,000 to 25,000 students annually. There are presently 2.8 million schoolchildren attending 1,823 schools located in 100 school districts within a 25-mile radius of the project site. No comparable interpretive center exists that can provide a similar level of watershed education to that proposed by this project. In order to effectively reach this underserved population, any new facility would include a comprehensive and accessible reference library, appropriately sized indoor and outdoor classrooms, as well as topical and live animal exhibits all tied to age-appropriate hands-on outdoor programming for school children. An interpretive center designed to facilitate this objective and meets the needs of this culturally diverse population should be able to accommodate varying learning levels, language proficiency and age groups, and include a variety of delivery methods and learning modes.

- 3. Expand the public user base to the currently underserved, diverse urban population located within a 25-mile radius of the project site with economically and geographically accessible interpretive facilities that would enhance awareness and regional interest.**

*Explanation:* To meet this objective, the San Gabriel River Discovery Center Authority seeks to build an architecturally unique interpretive center that would attract visitors. By situating it in the unique Natural Area, the Authority intends for the facility to serve as gateway to the outdoors for the area's dense, primarily urban population. There is presently a substantial service gap for the 10 million people living within the 25-mile radius. Because the interpretive center costs would be fully supported by the San Gabriel River Discovery Center Authority, there would be no entry or parking fees, making the interpretive center financially accessible to all residents. The site selection process considered the unique characteristics of the location, as well as the tolerance for travel distance and travel time for visitors who use public and personal transportation to access the interpretive center. The location is within 0.75-miles of the junction of two major area freeways: State Route 60 (SR 60) and Interstate 605 (I-5).

Economic and geographic accessibility is critical because 52 percent of the households within the 25-mile radius are disadvantaged, falling under the California Median Household Income of \$47,493 per year. Over 29 percent of these households have median incomes under \$25,000 per year. A very diverse population is located within a 25-mile radius of the project site. Over 45

---

<sup>1</sup> In 2007, only 4,747 school children are documented as attending programs at the WNNC. This is considered an anomaly by the Natural Areas Administrator.

percent of this population is Hispanic, 14 percent Asian Pacific Islander, and over 9 percent African American. Within one-quarter-mile of the project site, almost 85 percent of the population identify themselves as Hispanic or Latino. This is substantially higher than comparable statistics for the City of Los Angeles (46.5 percent), Los Angeles County (44.6 percent), and California (32.4 percent). A smaller proportion within the one-quarter-mile buffer are white (37.6 percent), and a much higher proportion are “some other race” (45.1 percent). By comparison, the proportion of the population identifying themselves as Hispanic or Latino within 25 miles of the project site is similar to the averages for the City of Los Angeles and Los Angeles County.

The proposed project would create an interpretive center that would be more noticeable and that would contain information focused on a wide range of interests, as well as providing meeting rooms that would draw visitors to the site for watershed related functions. Once at the interpretive center, visitors would be encouraged to view the exhibits and be attracted by proximity and curiosity aroused within the exhibit hall to become more aware of the values that still exist in the urban area and to see how these values can be protected and expanded.

**4. Create an interpretive center capable of meeting the outreach and educational programming needs of a diverse range of Stakeholders and Partner agencies.**

*Explanation:* The proposed project’s integrated topical and live animal exhibits, outdoor interpretive areas, programs, classrooms, and meeting rooms would accommodate and convey the diverse messages of its many stakeholders and multiple partner agencies.

Each of the partner agencies is responsible for one or more components of the overall educational message of the interpretive center. Taken individually, these components do not tell the full story of the watershed. The proposed project would pool the resources of these diverse partners and their supporters to convey an integrated educational and interpretive program. The extensive displays have been created to link these topics together in a way that visitors can understand both how they interrelate, but can also understand how individual residents fit into this complex pattern and how their individual actions influence the health and well-being of the entire watershed.

The proposed project would also provide a local and regional watershed education facility that demonstrates sustainable practices and connects visitors to trails and recreation opportunities consistent with the following objectives:

**5. Create a unique facility for the greater Los Angeles area focusing on watershed management for habitat, flood control, conservation, and water quality.**

*Explanation:* By maximizing its location in the heart of the Los Angeles Basin, the proposed project would provide an interpretive center that is readily accessible to millions of residents and convenient to many local water agencies, USACE, the County of Los Angeles, and the RMC with

the need to educate their constituents on the relationship between water, habitat, open space preservation, and recreation. This is a key objective of the SGRCMP.

Water education facilities are presently located out of the population center. Diamond Valley Lake is 65 miles and Pyramid Lake is 80 miles from San Gabriel Valley. Although these facilities provide excellent opportunities to learn about the complex system of watershed function and water facilities that supply domestic water to Southern California, their remoteness lessens their ability to disseminate this information to the region's largely urban population. The other museums in the vicinity, such as the Los Angeles County Museum of Natural History, do not address the issues of water and natural resources in an integrated manner. The other large interpretive facility in the area is the Aquarium of the Pacific, which focuses on marine ecology.

**6. Create an access point and hub destination for the Emerald Necklace Park Network, as the only interpretive center in this 17-mile loop of parks, trails, and greenways.**

*Explanation:* The Emerald Necklace alliance currently includes eight cities, Los Angeles County, the RMC, and several other parties signed on as formal members of the Emerald Necklace Park Network coalition, committed to its completion and maintenance. The Emerald Necklace Park Network is proposed as a connected network of trails and parks focused on the San Gabriel River and Rio Hondo River and their tributaries.

With its proximity to the San Gabriel River and the San Gabriel River bikeway, the project site is intended to serve as a new staging area and trailhead to the Emerald Necklace Park Network via a short trail connecting the exhibit hall to the bikeway. This trailhead would also provide an opportunity for users of the San Gabriel River bikeway trail, which extends from Azusa to Seal Beach and connects through Whittier Narrows to the Los Angeles Rio Hondo (Lario) Trail along the Rio Hondo River. Trail users would be able to stop in at the Discovery Center to gain further knowledge about the rivers.

**7. Provide a gateway to exploration of other natural areas and recreational opportunities in the San Gabriel River watershed.**

*Explanation:* Locating an interpretive center in Recreation Area, already the County's most visited park with 1.4 million visitors yearly, is a way to expose visitors to other recreational opportunities in the watershed region. The natural setting of the site offers a unique opportunity to draw people to this particular setting. It would provide a gateway to the Recreation Area and the County's larger park system, as well as other open space resources in the San Gabriel Watershed, such as the Angeles National Forest. The site is strategically located near the convergence of several area freeways to serve as a gateway to exploring other areas such as local city parks, the Santa Fe Dam Recreation Area, El Dorado Regional Park, Los Cerritos Wetlands, and the Aquarium of the Pacific.

---

**8. Provide leadership in sustainable building and landscape design and operations by integrating these features of the project into the indoor and outdoor exhibits.**

*Explanation:* The interpretive center would meet the U. S. Green Building Council's Leadership in Energy and Environmental Design (LEED) Standards of the highest level (Platinum). The proposed project would provide a green building example to allow visitors to see how these features function and how they could be used in homes, workplaces, and landscapes.

Each of the Discovery Center's partner agencies is responsible for one or more components of the overall educational message of the Discovery Center. Taken individually, these components do not tell the full story of the watershed. The Discovery Center facilities would pool the resources of these diverse partners to convey an integrated educational and interpretive program. The extensive displays have been created to link these topics together in a way that visitors can understand not only how they interrelate, but also how individual residents fit into this complex pattern and how their individual actions influence the health and well-being of the entire watershed.

### **1.3 SUMMARY OF ALTERNATIVES CONSIDERED**

The Draft EIR considered a range of potentially feasible alternatives to the proposed project to support informed decision-making and public participation in accordance with Section 15126.6 of the CEQA Guidelines. Three alternatives, including the No Project Alternative, are reviewed in Chapter 5.0 of the Draft EIR. This section summarizes alternatives to the proposed project that were developed and the No Project Alternative, as required under CEQA.

#### **No Project Alternative**

The No Project Alternative is evaluated as the "circumstance under which the project does not proceed" (CEQA Guidelines Section 15126.6(e)(3)(B)). Under the No Project Alternative, the proposed interpretive center would not be constructed and the WNNC would continue to operate within the lease boundary. Potential impacts associated with project construction and operation would be avoided because no improvements would occur within the lease boundary. Accordingly, no impacts related to air quality, biological resources, cultural resources, hydrology and water quality, noise, and transportation and circulation would occur. Although the No Project Alternative would not result in impacts that would occur under the proposed project, it would not fulfill any of the objectives of the proposed project.

#### **14,000 SF Alternative**

The space reductions to achieve a 14,000 sf interpretive center main building would be accomplished by eliminating the introductory theatre, topical exhibit areas, and one classroom; reductions in the size of the sales area, lobby, and administrative office spaces would also be required. The multi-purpose room would remain the same size as the proposed project. The covered outdoor classroom, open air classroom, constructed riparian/wetland area, and walkways would be the same as described for the proposed project.

The 14,000 sf interpretive center main building would be constructed to meet U.S. Green Building Platinum level LEED standards, as planned for the proposed project, addressing energy and water conservation, along with sustainable materials, native landscaping, etc. A new 116-space Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA)-accessible parking lot would be located on the east side of lease boundary. As with the proposed project, this alternative would provide parking for 3 buses. The existing woodland would be maintained to provide a vegetative buffer along Durfee Avenue to obscure direct views of the parking lot from passing motorists. As with the proposed project, a new vehicular entrance on Durfee Avenue east of the existing driveway entrance would provide the only vehicular access to the project site and would lead to the 116-space parking lot. This alternative would have similar impacts to aesthetics and hydrology as the proposed project. Impacts to air quality, biological resources, cultural resources, noise, and traffic would be reduced compared to the proposed project because of the reduction in building size, area disturbed during construction, and number of visitors that would be expected to travel to the lease boundary.

### **10,000 SF Alternative**

A 10,000 sf Alternative would be accomplished by eliminating the introductory theatre, topical exhibit areas, and one classroom (dry); reduction of the size of the exhibit area, meeting room, sales area, lobby, administrative office spaces, and restrooms would also be required. The covered outdoor classroom, open air classroom, constructed riparian/wetland area, and walkways would be the same as described for the proposed project. The same energy and water efficiency features as the proposed project would be applied to the 10,000 sf Alternative. The interpretive center main building would be constructed to meet the U.S. Green Building Council's LEED platinum level standards. Unlike the proposed project, access to the interpretive center would be provided at the existing driveway location. A new 83-space ADA-accessible parking lot would be located on the east side of the lease boundary. This alternative would have similar impacts to aesthetics and hydrology as the proposed project. Impacts to air quality, biological resources, cultural resources, noise, and traffic would be reduced compared to the proposed project because of the reduction in building size, area disturbed during construction, and number of visitors that would be expected to travel to the lease boundary.

### **2,800 SF Alternative**

The 2,800 sf Alternative would have a similar layout as the existing WNNC. The main building would be marginally larger and provide a more modern facility than the existing nature center. No outdoor classroom, open air classroom, or constructed riparian/wetland area would be developed as part of the 2,800 sf Alternative. This alternative would use the existing driveway and parking lot. The 2,800 sf Alternative would operate the same programs as the existing WNNC and would not be expected to offer the range of programs and events as described for the proposed project. The 2,800 sf Alternative would not result in impacts that would occur under the proposed project because it would function in a similar manner to the WNNC and would involve minimal site disturbance.

## Environmentally Superior Alternative

The environmentally superior alternative would be the No Project Alternative because of the absence of environmental impacts. In accordance with Section 15126.6(e)(2) of the CEQA Guidelines, if the environmentally superior alternative is the No Project Alternative, then the EIR shall also identify an environmentally superior alternative among the other alternatives. The 2,800 sf Alternative would be the environmentally superior alternative because it would result in reduced impacts compared to the proposed project and would have similar operational characteristics as the existing site conditions. However, this alternative would not provide a facility large enough to meet any of the basic objectives of the proposed project.

## 1.4 NOTICING AND AVAILABILITY OF THE DRAFT AND FINAL EIR

The Draft EIR was circulated for public review and comment on June 5, 2009, initiating a 60-day public review period pursuant to CEQA and its implementing guidelines. The document and Notice of Completion (NOC) was distributed to the California Office of Planning and Research, State Clearinghouse. Relevant agencies also received copies of the document. A Notice of Availability (NOA) was distributed to over 240 interested parties and adjacent property owners and residents, which informed them of where they could view the document and how to comment. The purpose of the 60-day review period was to provide interested public agencies, groups, and individuals the opportunity to comment on the contents and accuracy of the document. The document was available to the public at the following locations:

- South El Monte Library, 1430 North Central Avenue, South El Monte, CA 91733
- El Monte Public Library, 3224 Tyler Avenue, El Monte, CA 91731
- Pico Rivera Public Library, 9001 Mines Avenue, Pico Rivera, CA 90660

A copy of the Draft EIR and this Final EIR are also posted online at <http://discoverycenterauthority.org/>.

This document, together with the Draft EIR, makes up the Final EIR as defined in CEQA Guidelines Section 15132. The Final EIR will subsequently be reviewed by the Authority for certification. Certification is not the same as approval, but marks the end of the environmental review phase. Certification is a judgment that the EIR is a legally adequate information document in compliance with CEQA. Only when the EIR document adequately identifies all significant environmental impacts associated with the project can it be used in the project approval phase, along with consideration of other relevant factors. To approve a project, CEQA requires that either the significant impacts of the project (as identified in the EIR) be reduced to a less than significant level through the implementation of mitigation measures, or the approving body must adopt a statement of overriding considerations, stating that mitigation measures do not exist or are infeasible thereby resulting in unavoidable significant impact(s). The statement of overriding considerations states, in effect, that the benefits of the project outweigh the environmental impacts that would result upon implementation of the project. No significant and unavoidable direct impacts would occur from implementation of the proposed project. However, as



discussed in Section 4.3 of the Draft EIR, the proposed project would result in a significant cumulative impact related to global climate change, thus necessitating a statement of overriding considerations.

*This page intentionally left blank.*