

# THE SANTA ANA RIVER TRAIL AND PARKWAY PARTNERSHIP BUILDS A PATH TO SUCCESS

by Patricia Lock-Dawson and Ronald O. Loveridge



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The parkway encompasses open space and sweeping vistas.

*Riverside resident and avid cyclist Pete Staylor longs to ride his bicycle along the entire length of the Santa Ana River. Staylor knows that few experiences would thrill like a bike ride down the 100-mile-long river, descending from the snow-capped peaks of the San Bernardino Mountains through rocky chaparral-covered foothills and across broad inland valleys before reaching the Pacific Ocean. Finally, having waited for the past 40 years for the Santa Ana River Trail and Parkway to be completed, Staylor and others like him will soon see their dream realized.*

The trail was initiated in the early 1960s but until recently, no one had any idea when or how it would be completed. That changed with the establishment of the Santa Ana River Trail and Parkway Partnership.

For the first time ever, the three counties that surround the river have joined forces with 14 cities — Anaheim, Colton, Corona, Costa Mesa, Fountain Valley, Huntington Beach, Newport Beach, Norco, Orange, Redlands, Riverside, San Bernardino, Santa Ana and Yorba Linda — and the private sector to complete the crest-to-coast trail. In July 2006, the counties of Orange, Riverside and San Bernardino, the Santa Ana Watershed Project Authority (SAWPA) and the nonprofit Wildlands Conservancy signed and adopted a memorandum of understanding that created a regional partnership and formal mechanism to fund the trail's construction.

#### **A Model for Success**

Why has this group succeeded when past attempts at completing the trail have failed? Strong leadership, trust and a common goal all figure prominently in the equation.

“The elected officials from the three counties who worked to form the partnership realized we would be far more successful by working together rather than individually,” says Jon Harrison, mayor of Redlands. “It took trust on the part of the three counties and 14 cities to work together, but very quickly we could see that the process was working and that by sticking to the plan, we would see our region served as a whole.”

Corona City Council Member Eugene Montanez agrees. He points out, “When elected officials of diverse ideological persuasions are brought together around a common goal, we are able to accomplish great things — together.”

The group identified some themes common to other successful river trail projects and set about implementing them on the Santa Ana River trail. These included:

- A secure and consistent source of funding;
- A public-private partnership; and
- A group of local decision-makers to lead the effort.

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*A mother and daughter pause to read informational signage and take in the view.*



*The Santa Ana River's lush landscape provides a natural focal point.*

Because of its committed leadership, unique collaboration and action plan, the Santa Ana River Trail and Parkway Partnership has been extremely effective in its short tenure. In the past two years, the partners have:

- Secured \$45 million in state bond funding to complete the trail;
- Completed nine miles of trail, more than was built in the past two decades combined;
- Conducted an inventory of missing trail segments;

- Developed and adopted a five-year regional work plan; and
- Joined the counties of San Bernardino and Riverside with a 19-mile-long continuous ribbon of trail for the first time in history.

The groundwork for the partnership was laid in 2003, when the City of Riverside created what would become the first of many task forces set up by cities within the watershed. Riverside's Santa Ana River Task Force crafted a vision of what the trail should be. Other cities, with encouragement and funding from the Wildlands Conservancy, soon followed with their own complementary visions. This culminated in the regional collaboration and creation of the partnership.

#### **How the Partnership Works**

The partnership's primary purpose is to create a regional organizational framework and set the stage for collaboration among stakeholders within the Santa Ana River watershed. The goal is to complete the trail by 2012 with agreements in place to manage the trail cooperatively in perpetuity.

The partnership comprises two groups, the Policy Advisory Group (PAG) and Technical Advisory Committee (TAC). The PAG consists of elected officials from

Orange, Riverside and San Bernardino counties and cities within the watershed as well as executive officers from the Santa Ana Watershed Project Authority and the Wildlands Conservancy. Led by a consultant, the group meets bimonthly to set policy and legislative priorities and make decisions based on recommendations from the TAC. The PAG authorizes and directs the TAC to take actions to develop the trail.

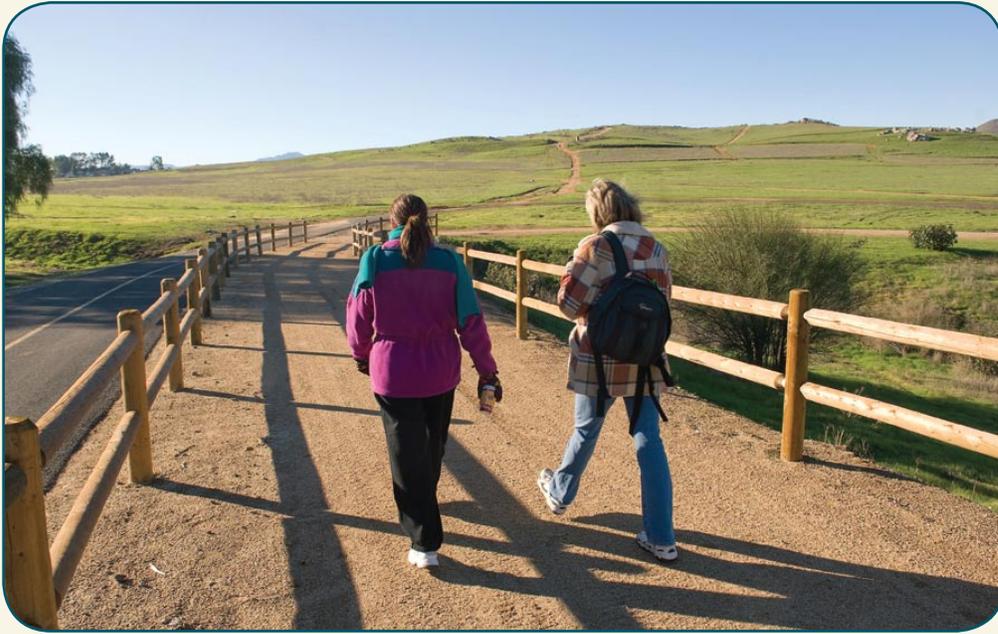
Parks directors from the three counties and 14 cities and staff from SAWPA and the Wildlands Conservancy make up the TAC, which meets bimonthly in alternate months from the PAG. The TAC's work focuses on three main project areas:

- Trail construction;
- Operations, maintenance and security; and
- Public relations, information and education.

#### **A Successful Financing Strategy**

A project of this complexity and magnitude requires an overall financing strategy with multiple public and private partners. When completed, total trail investment will exceed \$100 million in combined funding. The key to success is employing a diverse financing strategy and ensuring that strategic organizations and individuals are involved.

*The three counties that surround the river have joined forces with 14 cities and the private sector to complete the crest-to-coast trail.*



*Hikers appreciate the chance to walk unimpeded by traffic.*

The partnership has successfully garnered state and federal funds through various means, including bond issues, competitive grant programs and appropriations. Counties and cities have contributed significant local dollars, and the Santa Ana Watershed Project Authority has contributed money and staffing support to the effort.

In addition, private institutions have provided support and involvement. One such organization, the Wildlands Conservancy, has provided substantial funding and works effectively with government agencies to further outdoor recreational and educational programs, encouraging elected officials to make recreation and open space a priority. “The Wildlands Conservancy’s private funding has created a strong collaborative partnership with elected officials dedicated to successful completion of the trail,” says David Myers, executive director. “We’ve been able to use millions in Wildlands Conservancy funds to leverage millions in public money for land acquisition and park and trail development. We helped pass state initiatives that brought more than \$60 million in public funding to the Santa Ana River Parkway and Trail.”

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#### **The Trail’s Future**

Currently, 43 miles of completed, paved trail are available for hiking, riding and biking. Approximately 28 miles are left to finish: three in Orange County; 17 in Riverside County; and eight in San Bernardino County. Most of 2009 will be spent planning to finish those gaps. Construction will begin in late 2009, with the trail completed by 2012. The estimated cost of finishing the remaining segments of the trail is approximately \$38 million.

The challenge now, according to Riverside County Supervisor John Tavaglione, is to “stay the course and keep the partnership in place. Henry Ford once said, ‘Coming together is a beginning, staying together is progress, and working together is success.’ That has always been our definition of success as well.”



*A runner enjoys an afternoon outing on the trail.*

For now, Pete Staylor will have to make do with the trail’s completed portions and conduct his training rides in segments. In 2002, he didn’t own a bicycle and couldn’t get out of a car without assistance because of arthritis in his knees. Now every year the 55-year-old completes the California Coast Classic, a 550-mile bicycle ride to raise funds for the Arthritis Foundation. A donated bike and medical treatment got him started, but the lure of the trail keeps him going. He says, “You can’t ask for a better place than the Santa Ana River Trail to ride. It’s safe, well-maintained, there are no cars to avoid, no exhaust fumes to breathe and — it’s just beautiful.” ■