



CITY COUNCIL AGENDA REPORT

DATE: 3/4/2015

AGENDA OF: 3/10/2015

DEPARTMENT: City Manager

SUBJECT: Formation of an Advisory Group to Explore Development of a Pilot Paddling Program on the Lower San Lorenzo River (CM)

RECOMMENDATION: Motion to approve the creation of an advisory group, consisting of biologists, paddling and birding enthusiasts and City staff, to develop the framework for a pilot paddling program on the lower San Lorenzo River and return with findings and recommendations for City Council consideration by May 2015.

BACKGROUND: The City of Santa Cruz has placed a high-priority on encouraging positive activity in its parks, open spaces and beaches. This is particularly true of the Santa Cruz Riverwalk, the 2.5-mile long City park area paralleling the San Lorenzo River. The San Lorenzo Urban River Plan of 2003, the City's 2030 General Plan, Activating the San Lorenzo Riverway report of 2007, and the 2013 Public Safety Citizen Task Force recommendations all call for activating the Riverwalk. Activation and attention help dissuade illegal activity, while encouraging greater numbers of residents and visitors to enjoy the natural environment, improve their health and educate the public about this critical watershed that supports a majority of our community's drinking water supply.

Within this context, and following a Coastal Watershed Council and City Water Department staff led guided paddle tour of the lower reaches of the San Lorenzo in October 2013, City Council directed staff at its November 26th, 2013 meeting to develop recommendations for the City Council regarding the repeal of the San Lorenzo River's recreation prohibitions, as a means to activate community engagement and educate about the watershed. Currently under Santa Cruz Municipal Code Section 9.66, river paddling is prohibited, with exception by permit from the Parks and Recreation Director. Up until this time, the City had rarely if ever granted such a permit.

While City staff internally explored opportunities and issues related to relaxing regulations, the City granted the Coastal Watershed Council (CWC) permits to allow human-powered watercraft on the river for seven one-day events between October 2013 and August 2014. Permitting for all events followed City policy and was consistent with City Municipal Code Sections 9.66.090 and 9.66.030 governing recreational access to the river. Research with fisheries experts also acknowledged that paddling was not likely to adversely affect protected species.

The seven events offered numerous lessons, including that the community showed enthusiasm for these events, with over 250 paddlers participating. Other lessons included added knowledge related to logistics like parking, launch locations, City resources required to monitor paddling, safety, and the importance of tide and river flow on paddling conditions.

Additionally, birding enthusiasts voiced concern about the impacts of paddlers on birds. In response, CWC staff made modifications over the course of the seven events based on this input, including shifting launch locations, limiting where paddlers were allowed to go while on the water, educating and coaching paddler behavior while on the water, and timing of the event.

Those interested in this issue, paddlers and bird enthusiasts alike, have continued healthy a discussion about the prospect of future paddling. At this time, the City lacks sufficient data on the impacts of paddling on birds, their nests and habitat. The original paddling pilot did not establish this as something to track. City staff is not comfortable recommending relaxation of the paddling regulations without the benefit of additional study and experience with paddling. As such, City staff are now seeking direction from Council to formalize this ongoing discussion through the formation of a small advisory group of birding and paddling enthusiasts, credentialed biologists and City staff.

DISCUSSION: Staff recommends that City Council create an advisory group to explore options to move a pilot program forward. If this recommendation is approved, staff will identify and select community members from the birding and paddling groups to participate, alongside professional biologists who specialize in bird habitat and City staff from Parks and Recreation, Water and the City Manager's Office.

Over the course of a few months, the group will be tasked with reviewing available scientific data, previously held paddling events, other communities' approaches to paddling, environmental impacts and mitigations, monitoring requirements, launching points, public safety considerations, and length of pilot among other factors. More critically, the group will explore the benefits of pursuing a pilot, as well the feasibility of a pilot program. Should the group determine a pilot can feasibly be pursued, they are expected to establish a framework for the pilot, including paddling protocols, mitigation measures, monitoring and reporting requirements. Following deliberation, the group will bring forward its findings and recommendations for City Council review and consideration no later than May 2015.

FISCAL IMPACT: There may be small impact to the General Fund should the City need to contract with biologist(s) to participate on the group. The overall impact should be less than \$5,000 impact can be absorbed within the FY 2015 Budget.

Submitted by:	Approved by:
Scott Collins	Martin Bernal
Assistant to the City Manager	City Manager

ATTACHMENTS:
None.