

Visual Impact Assessment

San Diego River Trail: Carlton Oaks Golf Course Segment

Project Description

The San Diego Association of Governments (SANDAG) proposes to construct the Carlton Oaks Golf Course Segment of the San Diego River Trail (SDRT) within the cities of San Diego and Santee (the proposed project). The proposed project would consist of a Class I bikeway for the exclusive use of people walking and riding bikes and related physical improvements. It would extend a distance of approximately two miles between Carlton Hills Boulevard and West Hills Parkway through Mast Park, Mast Park West, and the Carlton Oaks Golf Course.

Specifically, the proposed project would extend westward from the Mast Park parking lot, under the Carlton Hills Boulevard bridge, and along the existing dirt trail that continues westward for approximately 0.5 mile through Mast Park West and terminates at the Carlton Oaks Golf Course. West of the terminus of the existing dirt trail, the proposed project would generally be constructed on or adjacent to the existing berm along the southern edge of the golf course for a distance of approximately 1.5 miles before its terminus at the existing sidewalk along West Hills Parkway. In general, the proposed project would include a 10-foot-wide path with 2-foot-wide shoulders. The main surface of the trail would be an all-weather firm surface, such as concrete, asphalt, heavily compacted and emulsified decomposed granite, compacted chipped stone, or concrete soils in natural colors so as not to appear dark like standard asphalt. Shoulders would be of compacted decomposed granite or compacted natural soils. Near the west end, the proposed project would install a bridge or similar structure to cross Sycamore Creek. Additional physical improvements could include installation of fencing, pedestrian-scaled lighting for safety, slope protection in slope areas south of the existing berm in which erosion is evident, removal and replacement of low flow drainage crossings along Mast Park West, revegetation of slopes, tree replanting and restoration of disturbed areas within the golf course, including the relocation of the Fifth Hole Tee Box, and other minor improvements.

Construction of the project is estimated to begin in late 2018 and take approximately 12 months to complete. Construction staging is anticipated to occur within the golf course and would avoid sensitive biological resources. Access during construction could be provided from West Hills Parkway; an existing dirt road within a utility easement along the eastern boundary of the golf course accessible from Carlton Oaks Drive; and/or from the parking lot at Mast Park, which could require excavation under the Carlton Hills Boulevard bridge to provide adequate vertical clearance for construction equipment, and along the existing dirt trail in Mast Park West. Some construction access points would require a temporary construction easement or other permission/agreement from property owners before use for construction access.

The final design of walls, fencing, lighting and landscape treatments is not known at this time. This study identifies performance standards related to design and visual quality that would be followed final design.

Visual Setting

The proposed trail alignment extends from West Hills Parkway to Carlton Hills Boulevard along the south side of the Carlton Oaks Golf Course, north of the San Diego River, and through a portion of Mast Park West.

The visual setting of the area around the trail (the “study area”) mostly consists of relatively large open spaces formed by the existing golf course and flood plain of the San Diego River. View from the existing trail and berm to the northeast are expansive, interrupted only by occasional mature trees found on the golf course. Northward views extend to an existing residential development made up of one and two story homes bordering the golf course. The upper portions of these houses are visible from many portions of the existing berm, but the residential structures are not prominent. Distant hills make up the horizon line behind the residential area to the north.

Views to the southwest from the berm are more restricted due to the thicker and taller vegetation growing within the San Diego River and its associated natural habitats. The river vegetation effectively blocks views of SR-52 which extends east-west along the south side of the river, within approximately 500 feet of the golf course. Refer to Photographs 1 and 2, which are views looking westward along the existing path, with the golf course on the right and river riparian vegetation on the left.

Within the eastern portion of the project site, the existing trail extends northward, then eastward toward Carlton Hills Boulevard, through San Diego River riparian areas, and alongside a seasonal pond. The trail in this area is edged on both sides with a post and rail fence, and dense riparian vegetation occurs both north and south of the trail, blocking far views. Refer to Photographs 3 and 4.

The existing trail within the project area varies in width, and some portions are more developed than others. The trail within photographs 1 and 2 is a narrow, informal footpath, while the trail in Photographs 3 and 4 is a more defined, graded trail. The portion that of the trail that exists within Mast Park, as shown in Photograph 4, is bordered on both sides with a post and rail fence.

At the west end of the project area, State Route 52 crosses over the river and golf course open space areas, and over West Hills Parkway, which creates the western boundary of the project area. SR-52 vaults over the area on a concrete viaduct supported by tall concrete pillars. Refer to Photographs 5 and 6.

The existing setting visual setting is mostly intact on the south and southwest side of the berm, with natural vegetation patterns formed by riparian based trees and mature shrubs that fill in between the pockets of larger trees. The setting north and northeast of the berm is more varied, but is harmonious and consistent in its patterns of open turf greens of the golf course punctuated with tree massings. These views are not of a visually intact natural area, but the undulating golf course landforms and groups of trees are supportive of a naturalized open space.



Photograph 1: Footpath next to the golf course.



Photograph 2: Footpath next to the golf course.



Photograph 3: Looking eastward along the existing trail next to the golf course.



Photograph 4: Looking eastward along the existing trail east of the golf course.



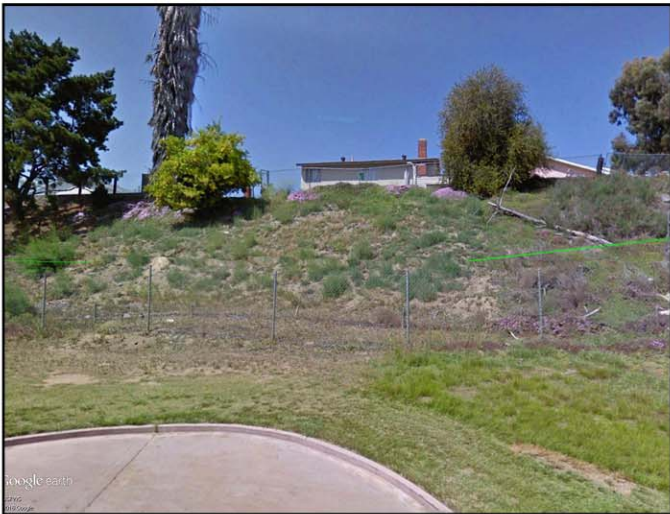
Photograph 5: SR-52 over San Diego River near the southwest corner of the project site.



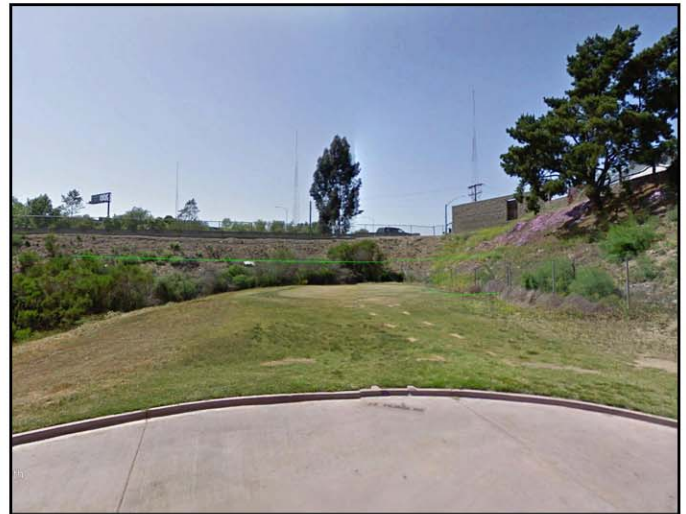
Photograph 6: SR-52 over West View Parkway near the southwest corner of the project site.

West Hills Parkway creates a visual boundary to the golf course and open space within the project area on the northwest side, since it is higher in elevation than the golf course. The road is supported by a sparsely vegetated slope, screened from most views by trees within the golf course and the river. The SR-52 viaduct creates a strong horizontal line high above the road, the hill, and the golf course. The visual environment of the west end of the project, therefore, is less intact due to the contrast created by the strong horizontal lines of the roadways.

Similarly, the northwest corner of the project area abuts the residential lots, which also are higher in elevation than the golf course. Most of the residential lots are supported by sparsely vegetated slopes. The lots are lined with chain link fences, and the lot at the western edge of the neighborhood, next to West Hills Parkway, has a prominent concrete masonry unit wall visible from the golf course and the proposed trail location. The contrast between the golf course open spaces and the fences, houses, and the wall reduces the intactness of the visual environment of the project area.



Photograph 7: Northward from the northwest corner of the golf course



Photograph 8: Westward from the northwest corner of the golf course, toward West View Parkway.



Photograph 9: Southward toward the existing berm and retaining wall at Sixteenth Tee Box



Photograph 10: Northwestward toward the existing berm from the Sixteenth Tee Box.

Analysis of Visual Change

For the most part, the proposed project changes would not contrast with the existing visual environment, since the implantation of a hard-surface trail where a soft-surface trail currently existing would not create much visual change. The widening of the berm to accommodate the trail would require the removal of up to approximately 100 mature trees along either side of the existing berm, within the grading footprint. While golfers and trail users would see this change, only those already familiar with the area would notice the tree removal. Most of the golf course trees would remain, and most of the vegetation within the San Diego River open space would not be disturbed. Temporary disturbances to riparian vegetation along the San Diego River would occur in select areas along the berm to repair existing areas where substantial erosion is present, and in the western portion of the alignment for construction access. Construction activities would include erosion control and slope protection measures, and revegetation to replace riparian vegetation. Minor permanent impacts to riparian vegetation would occur in select areas on the San Diego River side of the berm as a result of drainage improvements, drainage crossings, and trail intersection geometry (i.e., connection to the existing dirt trail just west of the Carlton Hills Boulevard bridge).

Trees removed from the golf course would be replaced at a 1:1 ratio with native or locally appropriate trees species that match the current golf course tree palette. All replaced trees would be a mix of sizes at installation to mimic natural succession and the variety of trees in the area: approximately 25 percent would be 24-inch-boxes, approximately 50 percent would be 15-gallon containers, and approximately 25 percent would be 5-gallon containers. The golf course trees would be placed with consideration to several factors, including

- 1) Protecting trail users from errant golf balls
- 2) Providing shade and a windbreak for trail users;
- 3) Replacing native trees in masses along the river side of the berm;
- 4) Providing native trees and trees appropriate to the golf course along the golf course side of the berm; and
- 5) Replacing trees within the golf course that may be disturbed by construction.

Turf within the golf course disturbed by construction would be replaced in kind. The proposed project would not use invasive trees, shrubs, or ground covers. Because of the proposed tree planting and revegetation efforts, distant views from the trail would not substantially change, and views to the trail area also would be similar to existing conditions.

The trail surface would be wider, more refined and consistent along its length than the current gravel and compacted soil surface of the varying width trail. The landform changes of the berm itself would be noticeable during construction, but the final configuration of the berm would be mostly consistent with the current forms, and would not create a substantial visual contrast with the existing visual environment. The berm also would be vegetated, and the small degree of visual contrast created by new grading would be reduced over time as the vegetation grows.

Several low retaining walls, up to four feet high – one near the Fifth Hole Tee Box, and three near the Fifteenth Hole Tee Box – would be used in place of the berm where golf course features abut the trail. Two other walls, from one to seven feet tall, would be placed along the trail where it turns northward

near the Sixteenth Hole Tee Box. A small, key-stone style wall existing in this area would be removed (refer to Photograph 9 and 10 for views of the existing locations where the new walls would be placed). The proposed retaining walls would be approximately as tall as the existing berm, and would face toward the golf course. They would be visible by golfers, but not by trail users. The new walls would be constructed with color and texture selected to resemble features within the golf course. Several short retaining walls currently exist within the golf course along the trail berm and edging ponds, sand traps, and water hazards. Designs to be considered include plantable concrete blocks; textured concrete; post and timber walls; and wooden planks. New walls could include texture and natural colors, and could include poured-in-place concrete (with formliners), textured block (such as split-face CMU), shotcrete or other sand-blasted surfaces. None of the new walls would be unfinished, smooth concrete or block, since these would contrast with the existing visual environment and would encourage graffiti. Careful design consideration to the materials and colors of the new walls would ensure the visual similarity of the new walls to the existing golf course and to ensure that the new retaining walls would not create a substantial visual contrast.

The Fifth Hole Tee Box would be shifted slightly northward, the Fifteenth Hole Tee Box would be temporarily reduced in size then reconstructed to its existing configuration. The existing golf cart path near the Fifth, Fifteenth, and Sixteenth Hole Tee Boxes would be shifted northward during construction of the project. The cart path would be reconstructed near its current alignment after project construction. The changes to the paths and Tee Boxes would not be highly visible because the final configuration would be visually similar to the existing golf course.

The project includes the installation of a post and rail fence system, such as illustrated in the isometric view of a typical segment of the trail, and in the cross-sections along both sides of its entire length. The fencing would consist of a post and rail or post and cable system, using natural or synthetic materials that resemble wood in color and texture. This fence would resemble the existing fence along the eastern portion of the trail (as shown in Photograph 4). Where necessary for safety reasons, a six- to ten-foot tall safety fence would be installed along some short sections of the trail near the Third, Fourth, Fifth, and Fifteenth Fairways to protect trail users from errant golf balls. The safety fence could be constructed from a variety of materials, such as wood framed, welded wire mesh, or chain link. Galvanized materials should not be used as the final finish, rather a black, brown, or dark green coating of the fence fabric would be used since galvanized materials are more noticeable and create higher contrast than darker colors. Several other options could be used to reduce the visibility of the safety fence, including angling the top of the fence, which would reduce the required height (an angled top is shown in Section B). Whichever material is used, the taller safety fence would be the most visible element of the fencing system, both from the trail itself and from the golf course. Color and material could reduce the visibility of the safety fence, as could vegetation. Remaining mature trees in the area would be, for the most part, taller than the proposed fence, which would ensure that the fence would not be out of scale with the visual environment of the area. Additionally, new trees planted to replace trees removed during construction would be located to screen the safety fencing. The following cross-sections illustrate the existing and proposed trail configurations and fencing. Figures 1a and 1b show the location of each cross-section.

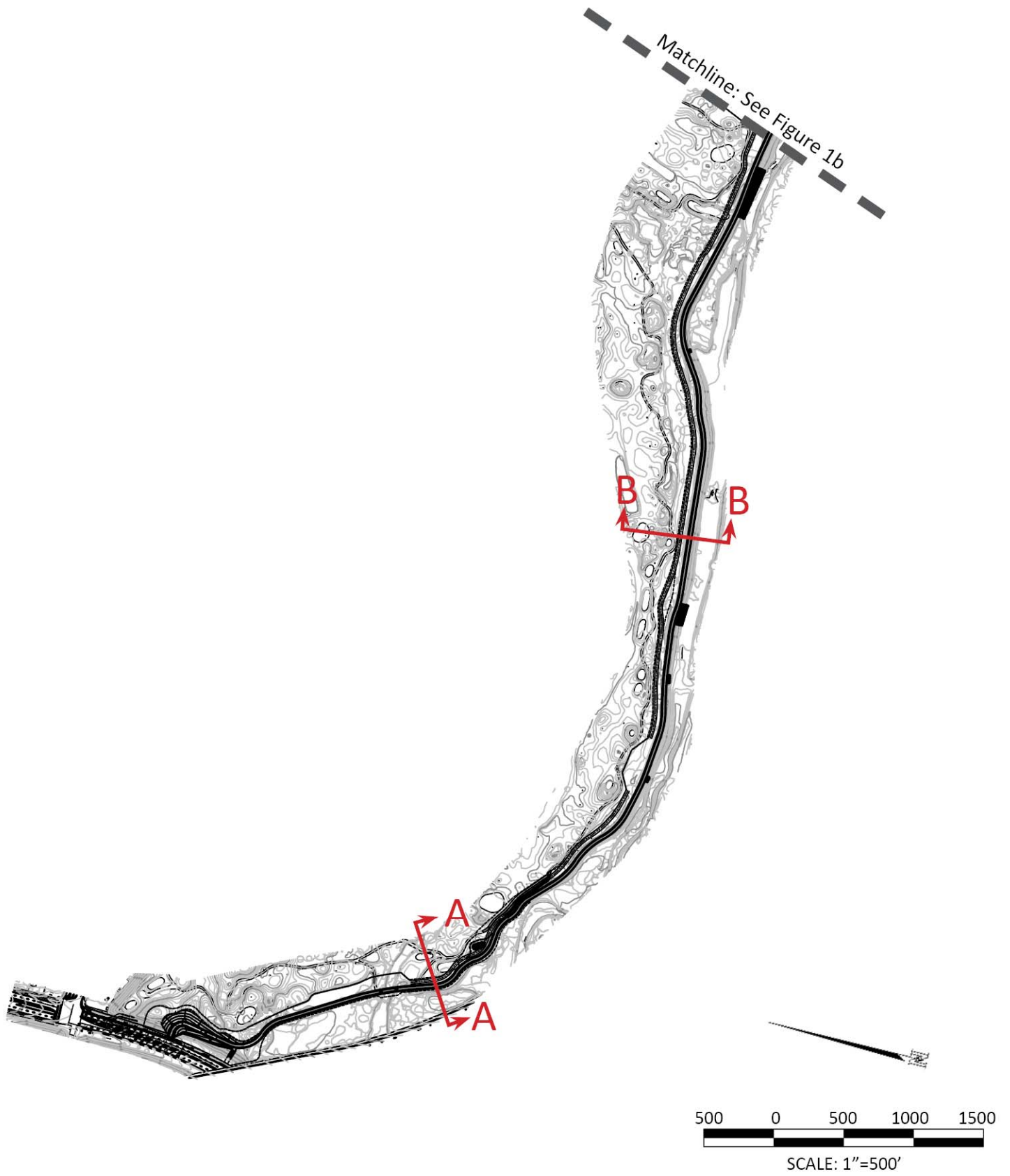
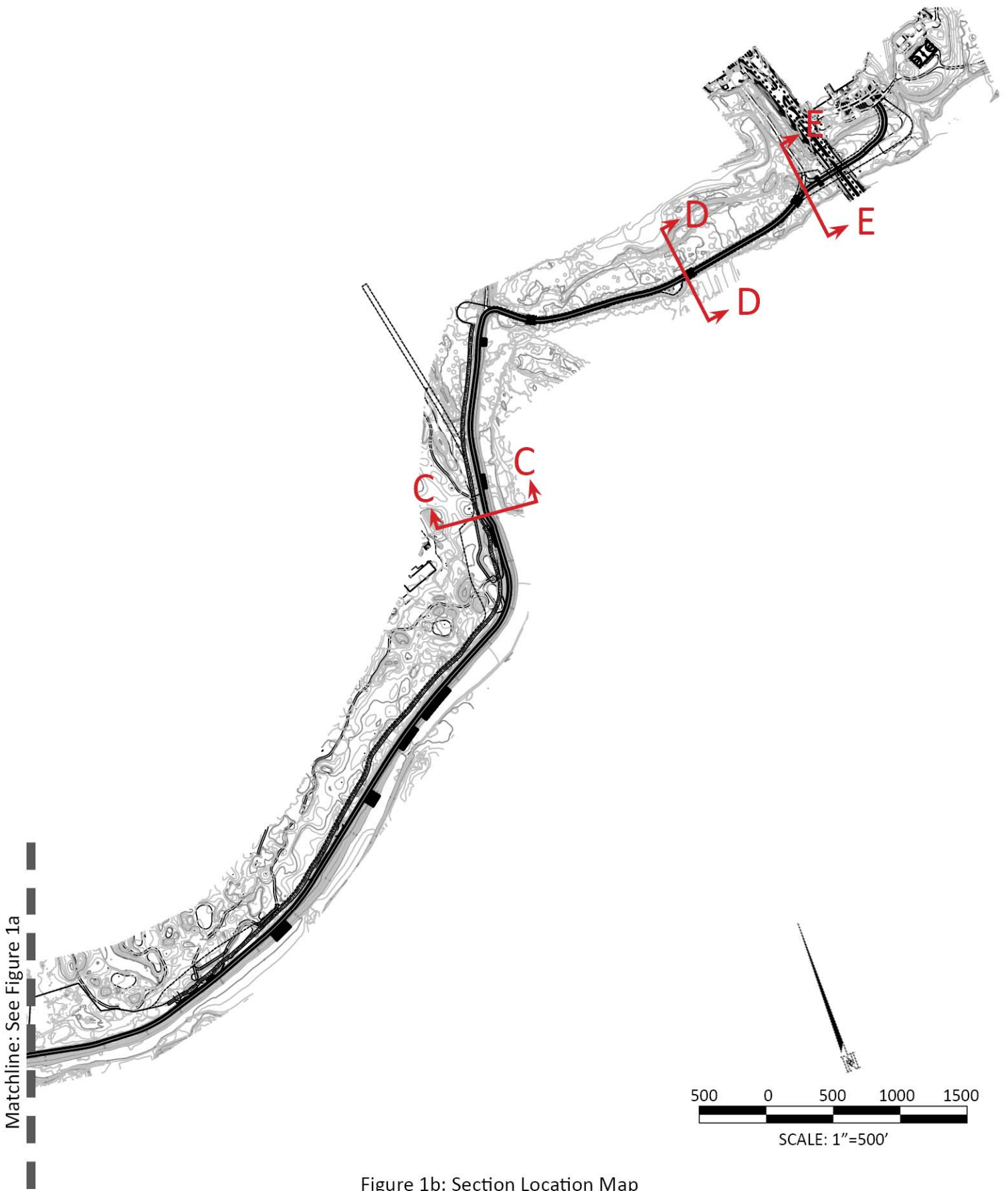


Figure 1a: Section Location Map



Matchline: See Figure 1a

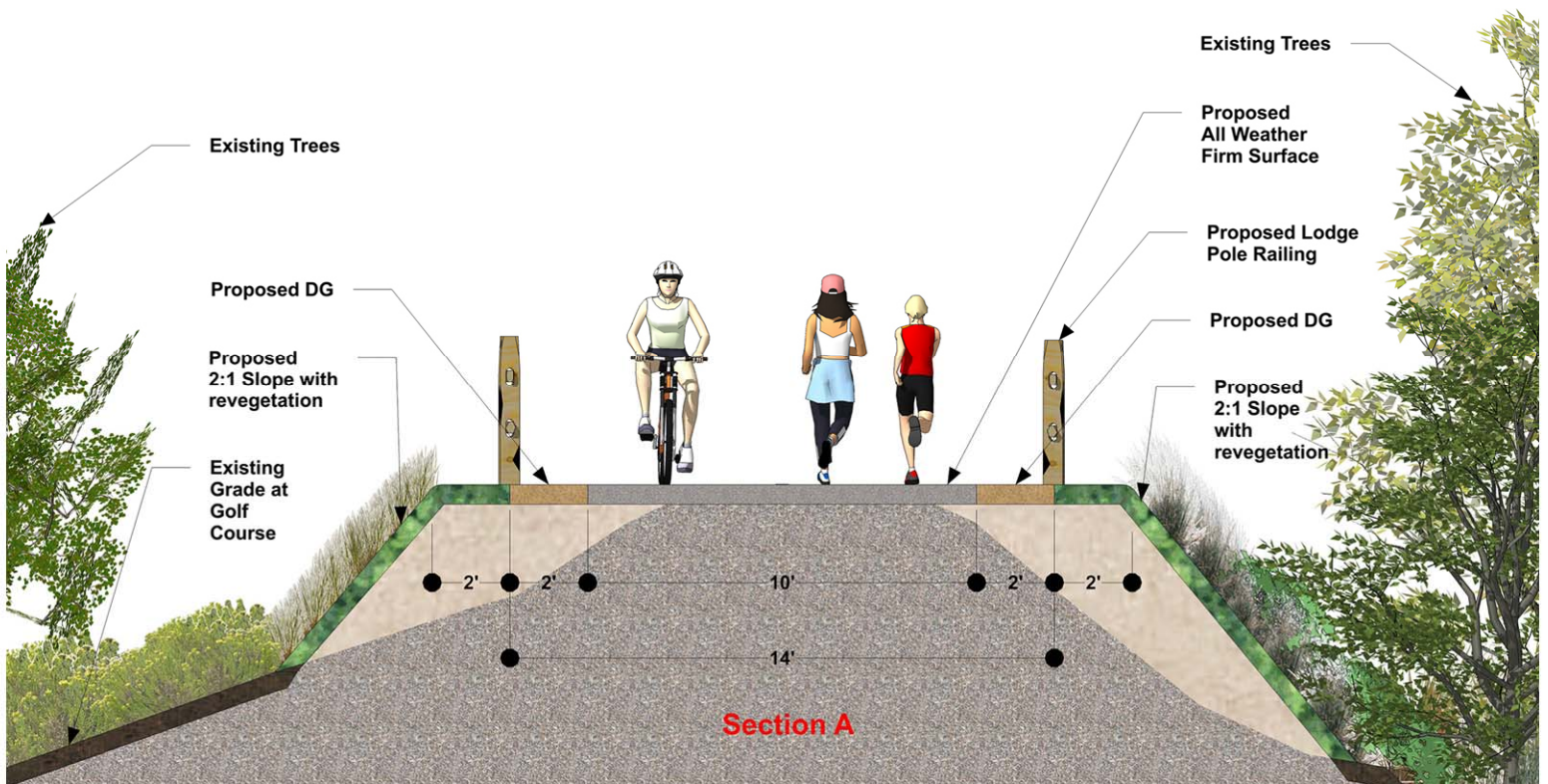
Figure 1b: Section Location Map



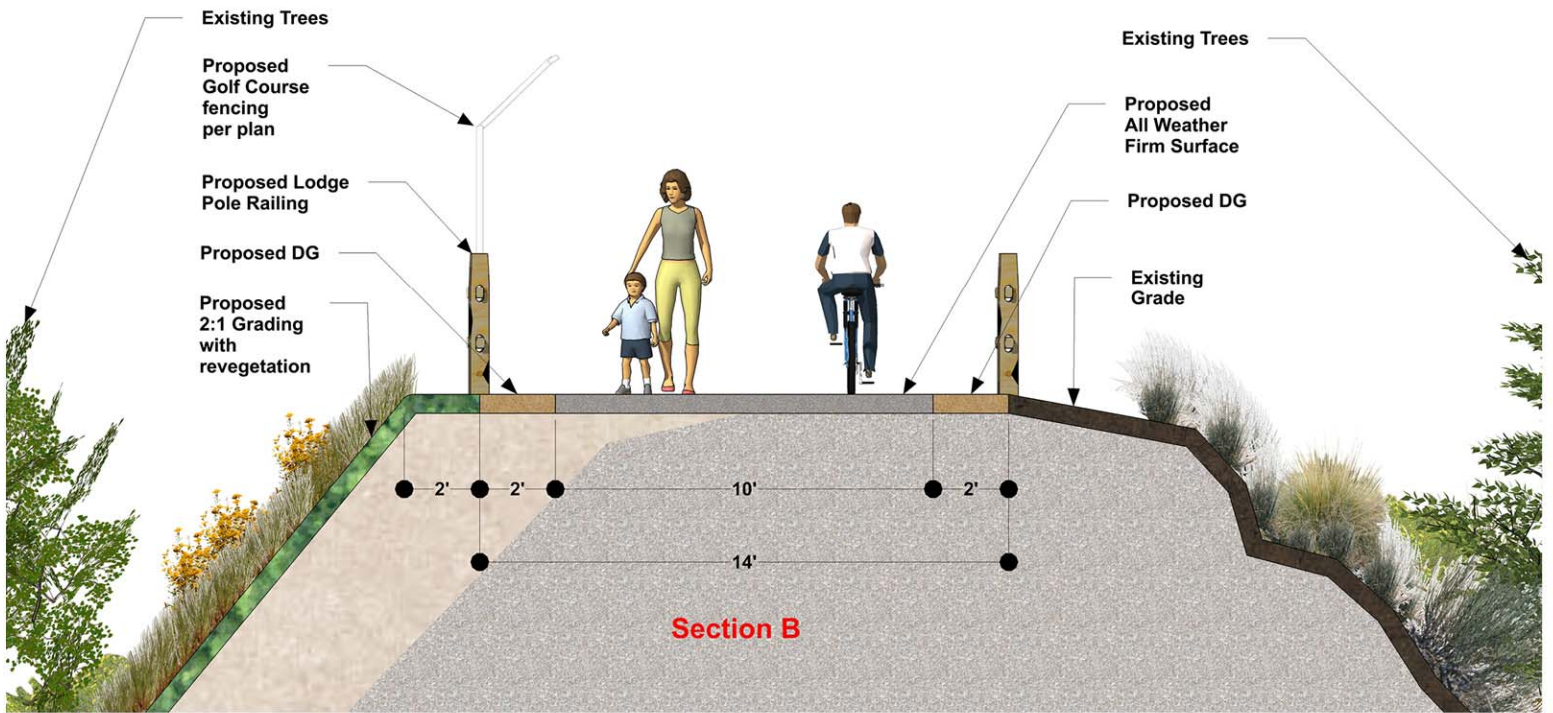
Isometric view - Typical Berm and Trail configuration

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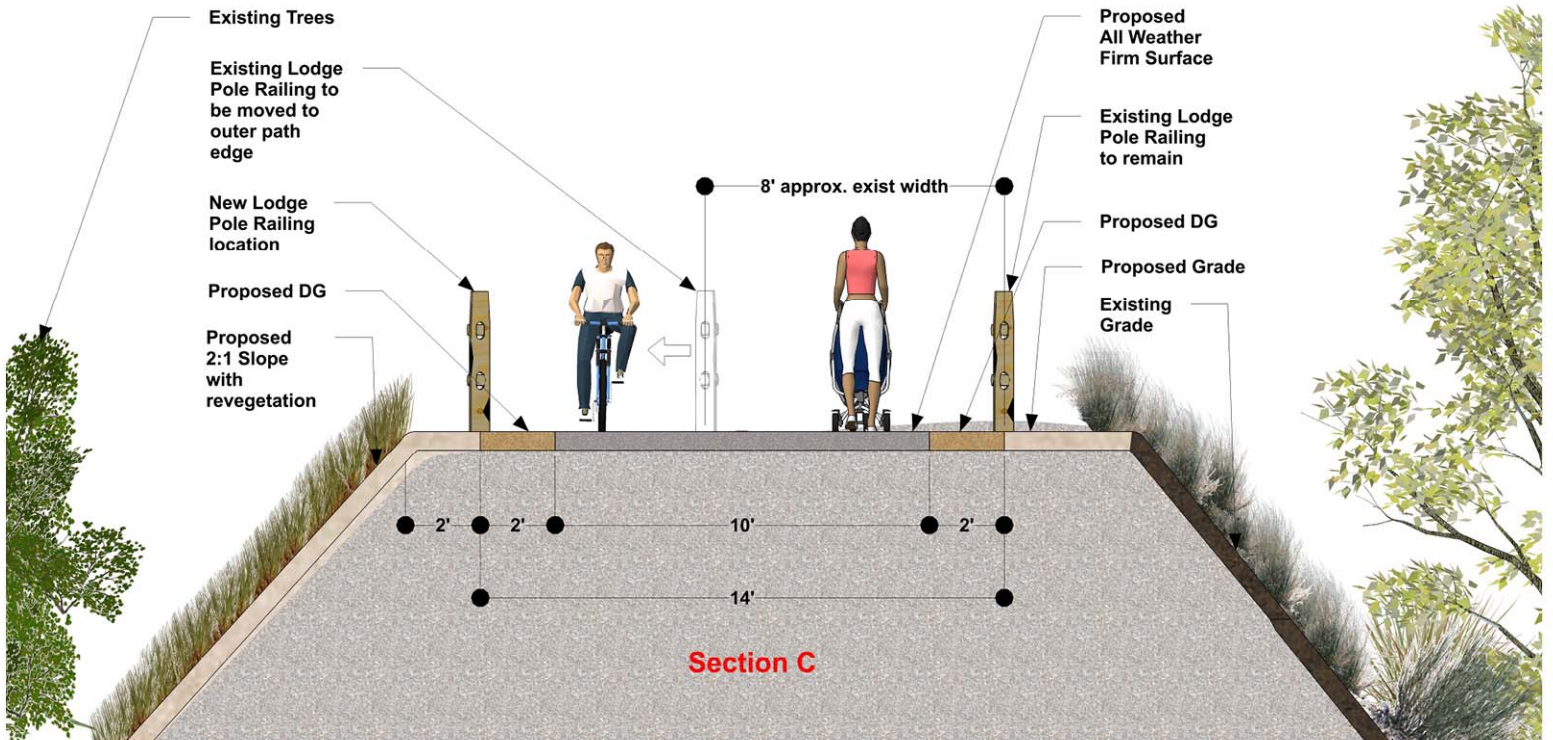
San Diego River >>



Section A - Berm and Trail configuration



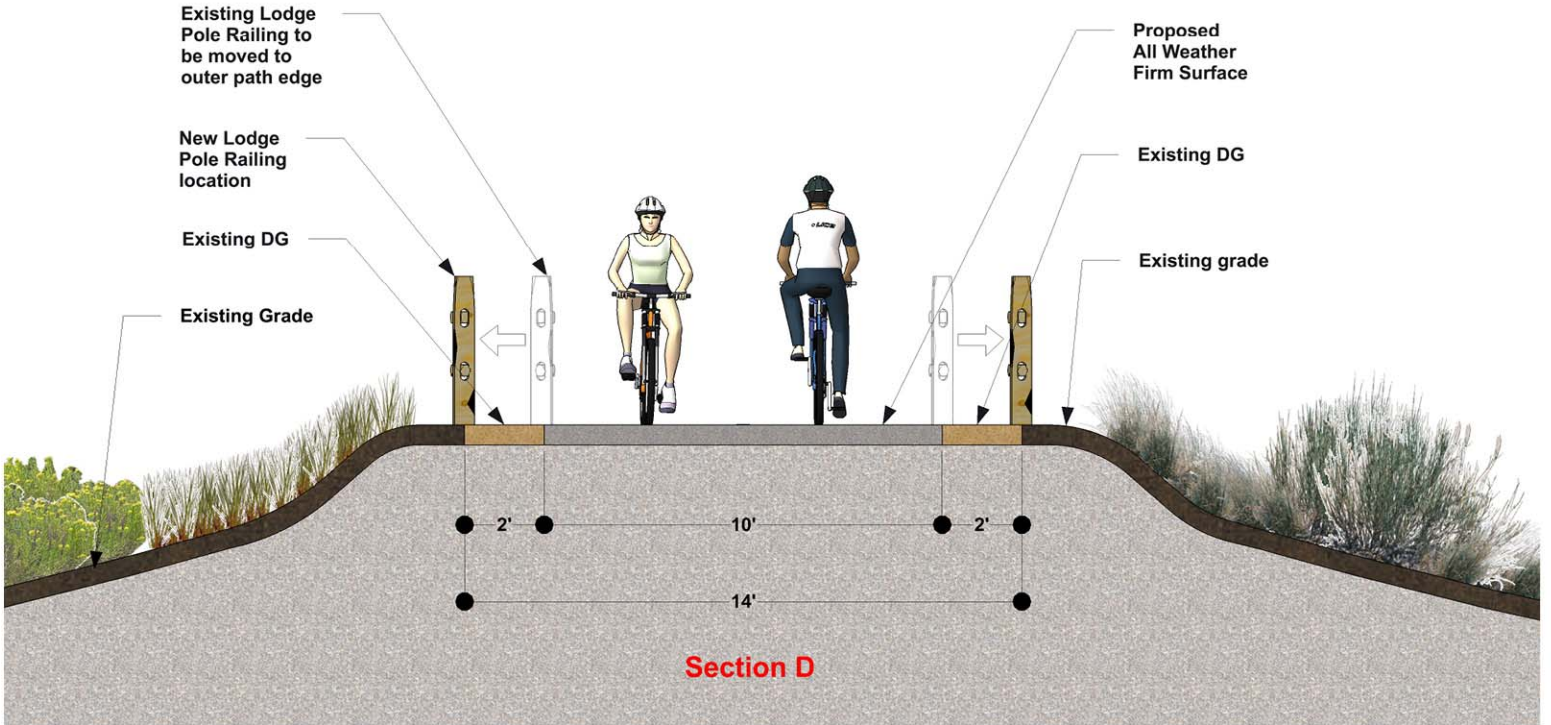
Section B - Berm and Trail configuration



Section C - Berm and Trail configuration

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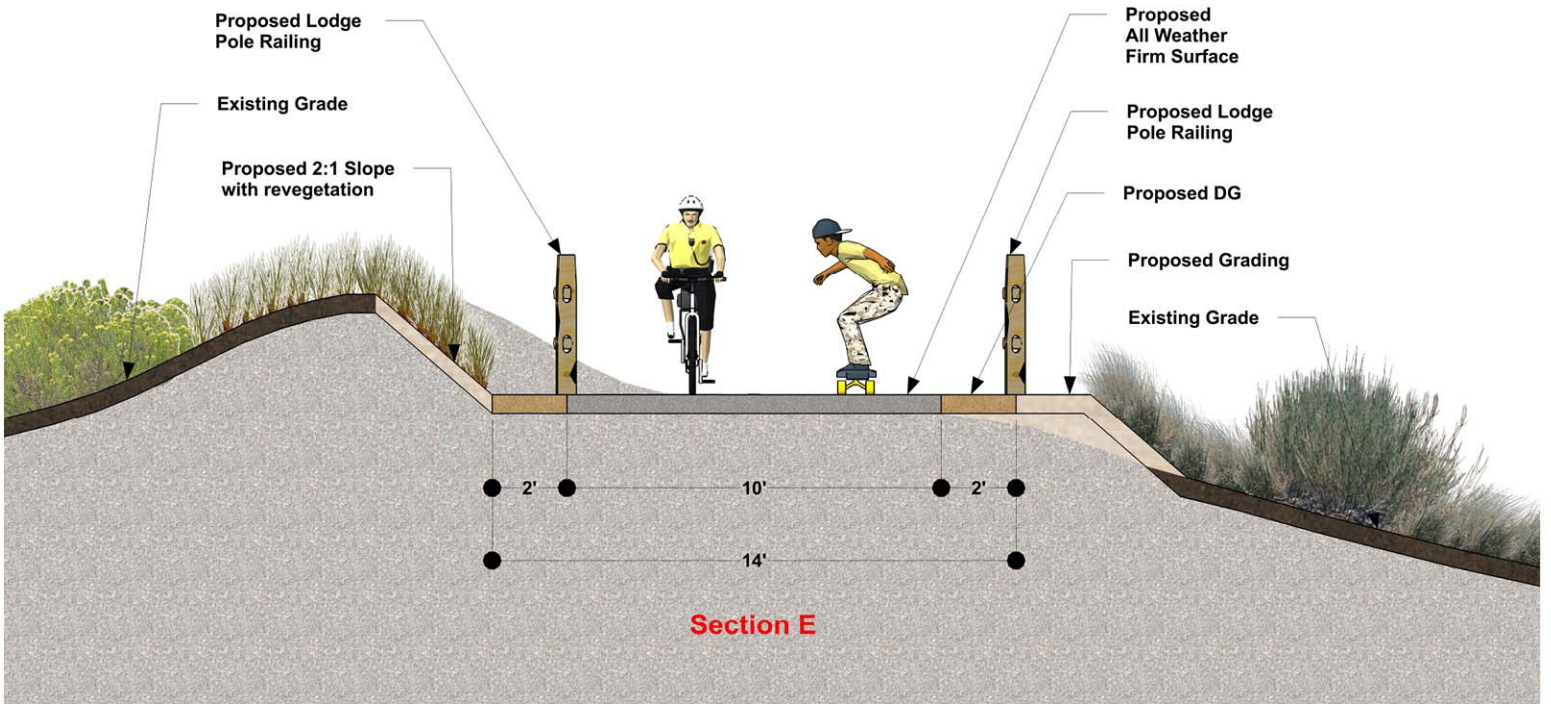


Section D

Section D - Berm and Trail configuration

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Section E

Section E - Berm and Trail configuration

The proposed project could include lighting. If so, lighting would be in conformance with the San Diego River Park Master Plan or City of Santee Parks Standards. The lighting would be fixtures on 8- to 12-foot tall poles, shielded to avoid light spillover into the sensitive habitat areas. The poles and fixtures would be natural colors, such as sand color, and the fixtures would be triangular in shape. The design of the lighting should ensure that a consistent level of lighting is provided for safety purposes, avoiding abrupt bright and dark areas along the trail. A system sensing trail users to turn on and off the lighting also will be considered.

Grading activities associated with the connection to West Hills Parkway also would create a visible change in the project area. Three options are available for the configuration of this connection. Each includes a staircase that would connect the trail to West Hills Parkway just north of the SR-52 overpass, a ramp, and slopes at a 2:1 (horizontal: vertical) steepness. Refer to Figures 2a through 2c and Sections F through H for illustrations of these options.

In the first option (Figure 2a and Section F) the trail ramp would connect to West Hills Parkway approximately 500 feet south of Carlton Oaks Drive. It also includes proposed minor roadway reconfigurations on West Hills Parkway to accommodate a bike lane from the trail connection northward to Carlton Oaks Drive. The first option does not have a retaining wall.

The second option (Figure 2b and Section G) would have a switch-back ramp that would connect the trail to the top of the staircase, and would connect to West Hills Parkway just north of the SR-52 overpass. A retaining wall up to seven feet tall would be needed to support the ramp.

The third option (Figure 2c and Section H) would have a wall ramp that would meet West Hills Parkway about 100 feet south of Carlton Oaks Drive. This option also includes a retaining wall that would be up to 15 feet tall.

Each of these options would require a slope to support the path and would be up to 20 feet tall. The slope would be similar in configuration and height to the existing slope below West Hills Parkway, but would be located about 75 feet east of the existing slope. Before completion of construction, exposed slopes would be planted with vegetation to lessen the contrast with the surrounding visual environment. The small degree of contrast upon completion of construction would continue to dissipate over time as the vegetation grows and matures. Vegetation and wall design treatments also would lessen the contrast the retaining wall may create in the visual environment of the area.

The changes would not be visible from the roadway, except the first option's bike lanes, which would require some reconfiguration of the existing lanes. The other two options would utilize the existing bike lane on West Hills Parkway. The proposed bike lane would not be highly visible, since it would be substantially similar in appearance to the existing roadway configuration.

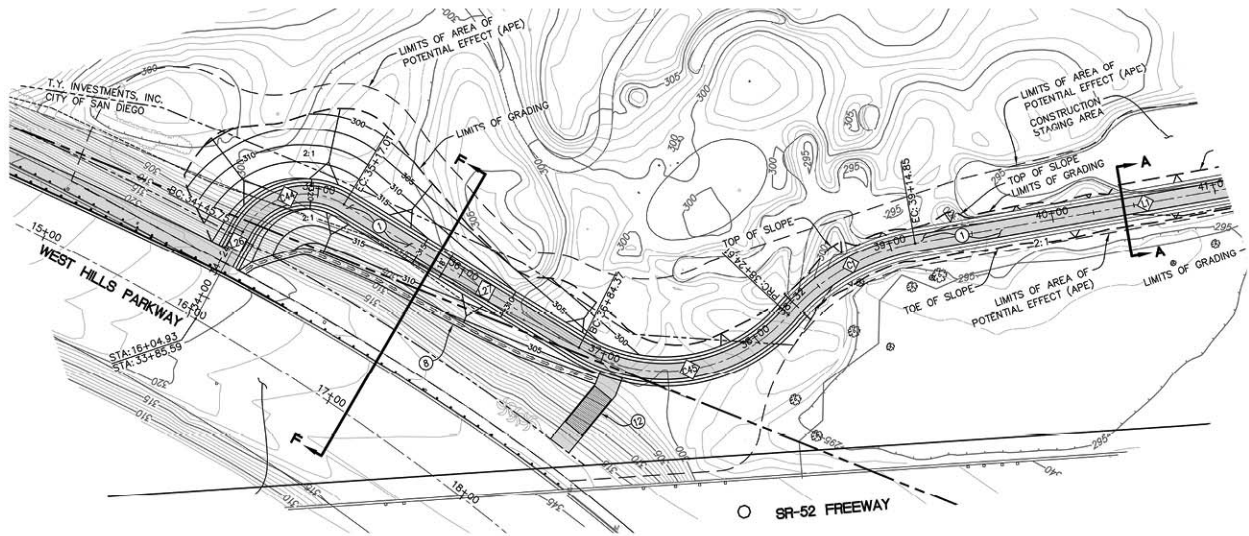


Figure 2a - Connection to West Hills Parkway Option 1

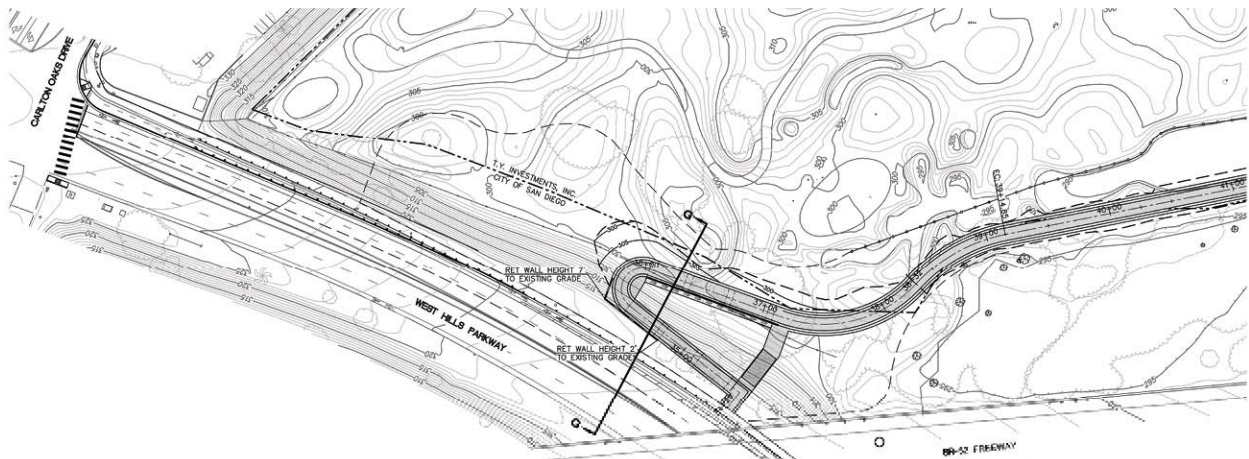


Figure 2b - Connection to West Hills Parkway Option 2

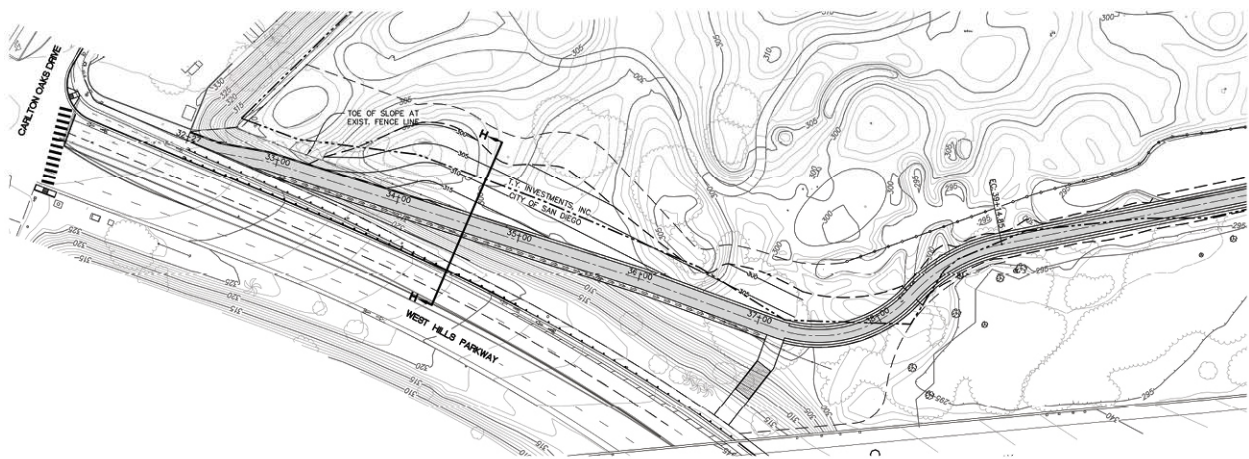
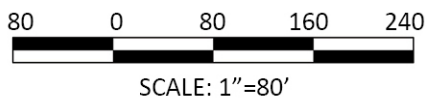
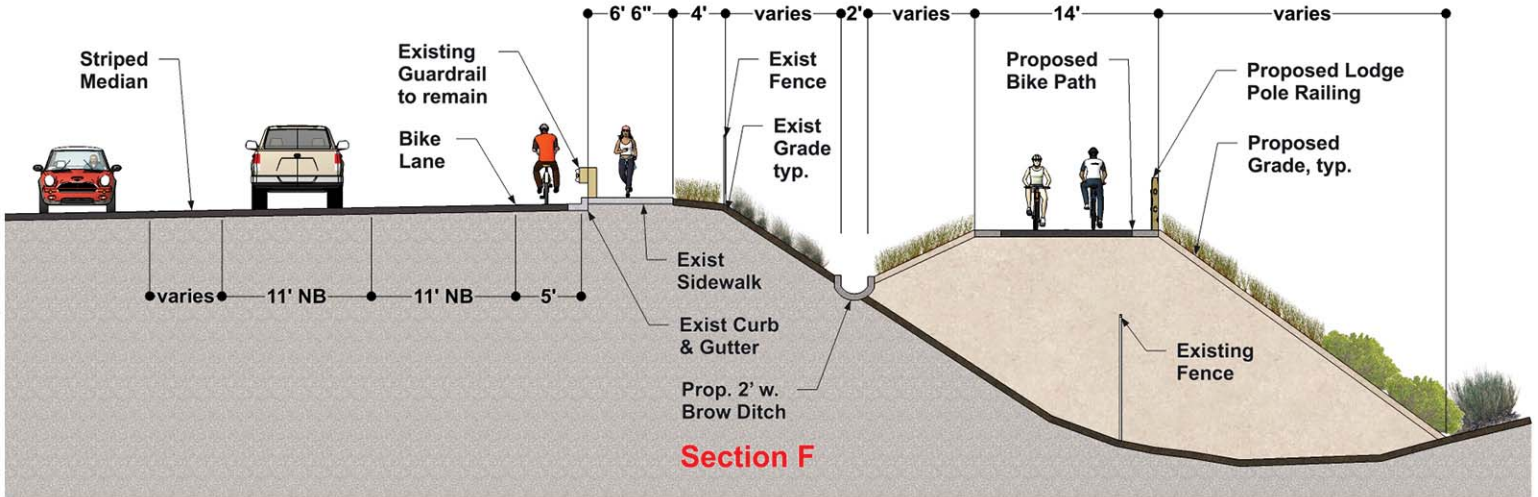


Figure 2c - Connection to West Hills Parkway Option 3

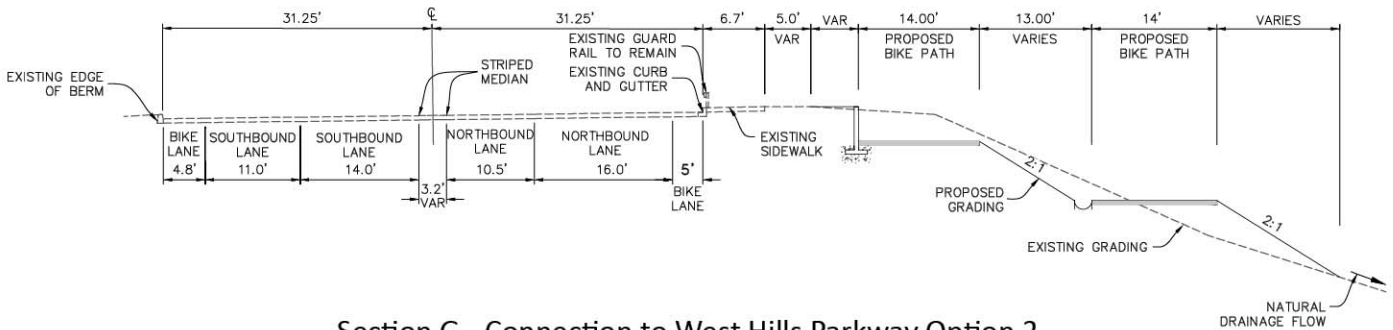


West Hills Parkway

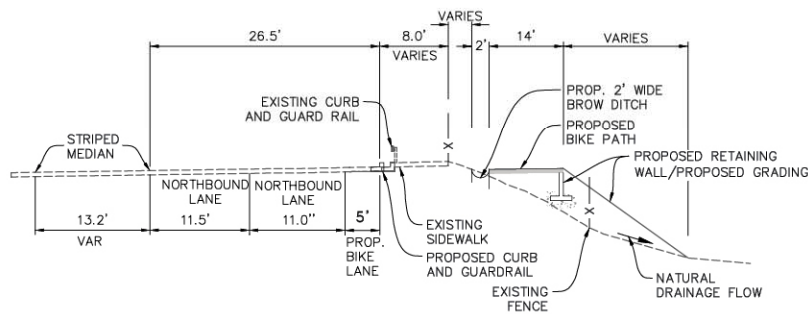
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Section F - Connection to West Hills Parkway Option 1



Section G - Connection to West Hills Parkway Option 2



Section H - Connection to West Hills Parkway Option 3

Viewer Groups

The existing viewer groups consist of trail users, who are mostly hikers and nature observers, along with the occasional runner or mountain biker. Other users in the proximity of the proposed project include golfers and the more distant residential inhabitants. Approximately 60 houses are aligned along the north edge of the golf course. Their back yards look over the course, and they may have some limited views of the trail and the proposed trail areas if walls along the back edge of their properties or vegetation in their yards or within the golf course don't block views southward. The westernmost dozen residents may see the proposed connections to West Hills Parkway, where walls and vegetation along southwest to western views. Some limited views of the area exist along West Hill Parkway and State Route 52, which would provide views to drivers on these roadways.

Contrast with Existing Setting

The proposed changes, as shown on the cross sections, would moderately contrast with the current setting. This contrast would occur initially with the removal of some mature trees and the overall width increase of the trail. However, without a before and after direct comparison, a user of the golf course or trail, is not likely to be aware of the changes, or to perceive them as being in stark contrast to the existing setting. With tree planting to replace removed trees and growth of trees and ground cover on the slopes, this contrast would be substantially reduced. Over a longer time, the visual contrast would be minor.

The fences lining the trail would be a noticeable element within the study area, visible both from the trail and from the surrounding area. The minimal height of the proposed fence and its similarity to the fence lining the trail within Mast Park, however, would ensure that the fence would not highly contrast with the visual environment within the study area. Minimal use of a safety fence in strategic areas along the north side of the trail to protect users from errant golf balls, on the other hand, has the potential to create a high level of contrast. It would briefly screen views from the trail, and may be noticeable from the golf course, as a tall, manufactured element in an area currently consisting of natural elements.

Additionally, the retaining walls along the trail at the southern edge of the golf course and retaining walls that would support the trail connection to West Hills Parkway at the west end of the project have the potential to create noticeable contrast visible by trail users, golfers, and residents. A retaining wall may be visually similar to the existing walls associated with a neighboring residential lot at the top of the slope in this area, however the walls, which would be between two and seven feet tall, may be stark, vertical surfaces, that would moderately contrast with the existing slopes north and west of the golf course. The slopes currently are sparsely vegetated, with some variety of color and texture, where a retaining wall, unless it accommodates vegetation, would provide less visual variety.

Likely Response from Viewer Groups

Overall, while the proposed project would cause some noticeable changes to the visual environment of the study area, the proposed project elements would moderately contrast with the existing visual environment and the change would not be highly noticeable to most viewers. The visual change would be reduced over time as vegetation matures, and the long-term visual change to the project area would be minor.

Hiker and nature observers are the viewer group that would be the most sensitive to changes in the visual environment of the area. However, the contrast of the proposed changes, as discussed above, would not be enough to suggest that the most users would respond negatively. In fact, some of the edges of the trail system would be improved to a more consistent and higher quality view that is more organized than the current situation. In addition, more individuals would be provided access to areas of high scenic quality of both the natural river flood plain and the opens space aspects of the golf course. Golfers would see an edge to their golf course that is slightly less natural and wild in appearance, particularly where retaining walls are proposed and where the chain link protection fence would be located. However, their perception of the intactness of the berm and the natural areas behind the berm are not likely to be negative.

The proposed retaining walls would be visible mostly to golfers and trail users. Drivers would not see the new walls, although residents along the north edge of the golf course may see the walls from their back yards. Construction of the walls with materials similar to those in use at the golf course currently would ensure that the walls would not highly contrast with the existing visual environment, and the viewers would not have a negative reaction.

Findings

Construction of the proposed project would necessitate the removal of existing mature trees along the length of the trail, but also would replace trees on the golf course to provide visual screening of the proposed safety fences. The slopes of the enlarged berm would also be vegetated. The initial contrast caused by vegetation removal and grading of the berms and the connection to West Hills Parkway would be moderate, and would dissipate over time as the trees and vegetation planted by the project matures. The long-term change to the visual environment due to vegetation removal would be minor.

The post and rail fence treatments would not be considered a contrast or negative impact on the existing character of the area; it would be consistent with the existing fence along the eastern portion of the trail. The use of carefully designed safety fences would ensure that the potential contrast and brightness of a metallic chain link fence would be avoided. Additionally, new trees placed to screen the proposed safety fence from views for golfers and residents would ensure that the resulting visual contrast caused by safety fences would be minor.

Most of the proposed retaining walls would only be seen by golfers, particularly if trees and shrubs are used to screen walls from more distant views from residences. Trail users would not see most of the wall, since they would be below the trail and facing the golf course. The use of retaining wall

materials that are visually similar to existing retaining walls within the golf course also would reduce the potential visual contrast created by the introduction of walls along the trail edge. The overall contrast caused by the walls would be moderate.

The inclusion of lighting would create some visual contrast within the project area. Currently, limited lighting exists in the area. The only area of the golf course that currently has lighting is the club house and parking lot. The introduction of lighting in an area that currently has none would be noticeable from residential areas north of the site and from nearby roadways. The light standards and fixtures would conform to the San Diego River Park Master Plan or City of Santee Park Standards, and the use of shielded fixtures would ensure that the lighting would create a moderate level of visual contrast at night. The use of natural colors and shielded light would reduce the potential visual contrast of the features during the daytime, and the light poles and fixtures would create a minor visual contrast.

Overall, the project's incorporation of slope revegetation, tree replanting, fence treatments, and use of retaining wall materials similar to existing walls would ensure that the overall visual change and contrast would be low and the existing character of the area would be maintained.