

Linking Transportation and Conservation Funding in San Diego

By: Michael Beck

The convergence of globally significant biological resources and the implications of the historic land use patterns have pushed the San Diego region into becoming a laboratory for large-scale conservation planning. The highest biodiversity in the continental United States combined with extremely high land costs and equally high development pressure were linked permanently and historically by a four-ounce songbird in 1993.

The listing of the California gnatcatcher as Endangered under the federal Endangered Species Act forced the nascent State Natural Communities Conservation Plan (NCCP) into formal conservation planning in San Diego around that time. The arduous, collaborative, stakeholder-driven planning and implementation of that program continues today. Eventually, the entire San Diego region will be enrolled in the NCCP, with perhaps 400,000-plus acres and over 150 plant and animal species covered by the program.

For the plan to meet its broad-ranging goals, a number of regionally unique NCCP “gears” have to be developed, manufactured, and linked across the physical, political, and jurisdictional landscape. Those include:

1. Regional science-based biological standards and guidelines.
2. Adoption of Implementing Agreements legally linking the federal, state, and local governments.
3. Jurisdictionally unique, resource-based land use planning implementing ordinances.
4. Species and habitat-specific adaptive management strategies.
5. Science-based regional species monitoring to track species viability and inform adaptive management directives.
6. Permanent adequate funding to implement the land acquisition, adaptive management, and species monitoring objectives of the program.

The funding obligations are divided among federal and state agencies and local government. To date, over \$400 million have been invested in the NCCP, the bulk of which have come from federal and state agencies. It is estimated that the eventual cost of the program, including endowments for management and monitoring will exceed three billion dollars.

In 2000, environmental NCCP stakeholders under the leadership of San Diego City Mayor Susan Golding proposed linking a regional transportation tax reauthorization to the regional habitat funding obligation. By extending the local transportation TransNet half-cent sales tax by ten years beyond the thirty-year San Diego Association of Governments (SANDAG) proposal, \$1.4 billion would be generated to fund the regional obligation. For a number of reasons that initiative stalled, however the effort created the framework for a subsequent successful endeavor.

An NGO stakeholder group, the Quality of Life Coalition, was created at that time with the goal of developing a consensus on the new Regional Transportation Plan (RTP) and formulating a strategy to fund NCCP obligations. Other regional funding needs including water quality, beach sand replenishment, and affordable housing were also examined. The coalition included environmental organizations, the San Diego Taxpayers Association, development interests, and other community interest groups and leaders.

In 2002, negotiations with SANDAG were initiated with the goal of generating NCCP funding and refining the elements of the RTP. A successful negotiation would generate support from Quality of Life Coalition member organizations for SANDAG's proposed reauthorization of the half-cent TransNet sales tax, planned for a public vote in November 2004. A two-thirds majority would be necessary to pass the initiative.

The original strategy to extend the sales tax time frame (exclusively) to generate roughly one billion in habitat funding was altered to require a linkage with transportation biological mitigation. Eventually the negotiations resulted in \$880 million dedicated to NCCP funding, \$650 million for transportation mitigation and \$230 million in "flexible" funding for acquisition, management, monitoring, and financing. These funds would be "front loaded" to make the bulk of the funding available in the first ten years of the forty year measure. Additionally, the TransNet Ordinance would include the requirement that SANDAG be responsible for initiating a subsequent endeavor to generate funds necessary to complete the regional funding within four years of the passage of the TransNet reauthorization.

On November 2, 2004 in spite of opposition from the San Diego County Board of Supervisors and the Sierra Club TransNet **Measure A** barely passed with just over 66% of the vote. A large majority of Quality of Life Coalition member organizations supported the measure.

Since that time a strategy has been under development to generate the "Phase II" regional habitat funding obligated by **Measure A**.

Recently the SANDAG Board, comprised of the 18 cities and the County of San Diego, voted unanimously to examine strategies to generate between \$1.7 and \$2.4 billion in additional regional habitat funding. The Board will also examine strategies to help fund regional water quality, beach sand replenishment, and transit needs. Various strategies, including a regional Quality of Life bond will be examined. A bond measure would go to a public vote in 2008 or 2010.