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# Ambitious plan would restore Escondido Creek



In this 2012 photo, bicyclists ride by a channelized section of Escondido Creek. The Escondido Creek Conservancy is launching plans to restore the creek to its natural state. (Charlie Neuman)



By **Deborah Sullivan Brennan**

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**A** concrete channel that cuts through a large chunk of [Escondido](#) may get a makeover, as conservationists begin planning to restore Escondido Creek to its natural state.

The nonprofit Escondido Creek Conservancy is seeking \$355,000 through a regional water grant to begin designing the restoration project — a first step toward transforming the urban culvert from a polluted canal to a picturesque waterway, officials said.

“We would love to see it be a much more natural channel, and a public amenity for the community..” said Ann Van Leer, executive director of the conservancy.

The proposal targets state bond money earmarked for projects that involve poorer communities in water management. The creek plan is one of a package of proposals in a \$5.5 million grant request by the county's Integrated Regional Water Management program, administered by the San Diego County Water Authority.

Escondido Creek flows 26 miles from its headwaters in Bear Valley above Lake Wohlford, to the ocean at San Elijo Lagoon. For most of that length it flows in its natural course, but for seven miles through the city of Escondido, it's contained within concrete embankments and lined with chain-link fence.

That structure was designed in the 1960s to control floodwater, but would eventually "bifurcate neighborhoods and create a scar on the landscape that would affect property values and the quality of life for nearby residents," according to the project proposal.

The creek restoration plan could improve both water quality and adjacent neighborhoods, said Mark Stadler, program manager for Integrated Regional Water Management.

"We're just really happy to have the opportunity to support it, because it will supply multiple benefits and involve multiple partners in a disadvantaged community," he said. "And it will lead to a larger project, because this is just the beginning."

The initial funding would cover preliminary designs for a pilot project to improve a quarter-mile stretch of the creek, where it flows through Grape Day Park in downtown Escondido. It would be part of a city project called "PeopletothePark," which recommends renovating Grape Day Park to make it bigger, build a new library and restore the section of Escondido Creek that flows through the park.

That segment would be a model for further creek restoration, which conservancy officials envision as a linear public park.

"We would like that to be a green, verdant, shady park through the city," Van Leer said. "It's very exciting."

A natural creekbed would cool and clean the water that flows through the course, helping to improve habitat downstream for diverse species, including dragonflies, damsel flies and stone flies, Van Leer said. The conservancy ultimately hopes to improve conditions enough to reintroduce steelhead to the creek.

Turning what is essentially a storm drain into a river park could also jump start urban renewal, officials said. They note that property values are higher near urban parks, and that other cities have embarked on similar restoration efforts.

The cities of Los Angeles and Santa Ana are removing concrete channels along their rivers, the proposal notes, and River Walk at San Antonio Texas generates an estimated \$1 billion annually in economic activity for that city, including jobs and tax revenues.

In San Diego County, the city of [San Marcos](#) has begun building its Creek District, which aims to build a mix of residential projects, and a small amount of retail and restaurant space, along San Marcos Creek, while

preserving and enhancing creek habitat.

“As parks are restored, the economic value increases,” Van Leer said. “As people use parks more they recreate more and families come together.”

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