



San Diego Canyonlands

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Canyon Enhancement Planning Ruffin Canyon Action Plan

I. INTRODUCTION

San Diego Canyonlands (SDCL) is a non-profit organization dedicated to restoration and preservation of San Diego's unique canyons and creeks. SDCL has established a Canyon/Creek Enhancement Planning (CEP) Committee to create a guide for community stakeholders that facilitates a systems approach for integrating our natural open spaces within the fabric of the urban environment. The steps of the CEP process include the following:

1. **Friends Group Creation:** Establish a knowledgeable Friends Group (stewardship group)
2. **Mapping and Analysis:** Create GIS maps of existing conditions for analysis and opportunities assessment
3. **Community Engagement and Planning:** Assemble community stakeholders; conduct a series of stakeholder workshops for input; and create an Action Plan that summaries the enhancement opportunities, priorities, and solutions to identified issues/problems
4. **Plan Approval:** Build local support, including from civic and planning groups; seek funding, as needed, and obtain permits and/or California Environmental Quality Act (CEQA) compliance
5. **Plan Implementation:** Implement the plans where possible through volunteers, collaborations, and partnerships; for other major improvements, seek funding and implement when possible

This Action Plan is the outcome of the third step—Community Engagement and Planning—in the CEP process. Three Ruffin Canyon community stakeholder meetings have been held, including one field visit to the canyon. These meetings were held on September 28, 2016; November 30, 2016; and February 25, 2017. Stakeholder priorities, concerns, and other comments were gathered during the two initial indoor stakeholder meetings. Additionally, during the field visit, the stakeholder group examined the conditions of the current social trail, beginning at the northern end of the canyon and ending at the southern end of the canyon near and through the Escala Homeowners Association (HOA) property. They discussed trail improvement and alignment possibilities including possible realignment of the Escala HOA easement. This Action Plan summarizes the information gathered during the stakeholder meetings and lays out the goals for Ruffin Canyon that may be included in a community-supported Action Plan. The Ruffin Canyon Action Plan has been developed based on comments received during the stakeholder meetings and discussions between the various stakeholders, which include regular Ruffin Canyon users, residents of the Serra Mesa, Mission Valley, Escala community, the School District, SDGE, City Rangers and other interested persons/parties.

II. EXISTING CONDITIONS

Ruffin Canyon, part of the City of San Diego's open space system, is located within the Serra Mesa Community and stretches south to Mission Valley. The canyon is surrounded on all sides by residential development. Additional uses include Taft Middle School at the northern end of the canyon; Mission Village Christian Fellowship at the top of Shawn Canyon trailhead on the east of Ruffin Canyon; San Diego Gas & Electric Company-owned open space (SDG&E buffer area) at the southern end of the canyon and to the west leading to Sandrock Canyon; and the Escala HOA-owned land in the southern end of the canyon.

With the help of college interns, SDCL has mapped the existing socio-infrastructure conditions including approved trails and social trails, land ownership, utilities etc. SDCL has also mapped the geotopographical conditions and view-sheds, and vegetation conditions in the canyon.

The California Coastal Conservancy (CCC) has funded San Diego Canyonlands to conduct stakeholder workshops to develop canyon enhancement plans for twelve urban canyons including Ruffin Canyon to include trails (as needed), habitat restoration/enhancement, viewpoints, signage, and other amenities. Further CCC funding is earmarked for trails and habitat restoration conceptual plans.

A public use trail system exists throughout Ruffin Canyon, including Ruffin Canyon trail and Shawn Canyon Trail. Portions of the trail double as a utility/sewer access road for the City of San Diego. Two trailheads are located at the northern end of the canyon, at either side of Taft Middle School (off of Gramercy Drive); one trailhead is located at the eastern extent of the finger canyon (Shawn Canyon) off of Shawn Avenue, and one trailhead at the southern end within Escala HOA property off of Pompeii Lane.

The northern portion of Ruffin Canyon Trail—beginning at Taft Middle School and ending just after Shawn Canyon utility maintenance road merges with Ruffin Canyon, is in relatively good condition. It requires improvement and perhaps minor realignments but these would likely fall under the “existing trail maintenance” category. From the Shawn Canyon intersection, as the trail travels south, the condition of the trail worsens due to the presence of large cobble within the ephemeral stream. The City uses this stream as a utility access road. Some smaller cobble exists within portions of the trail. Many stakeholders have voiced concern about the cobble, as it provides an unstable walking surface. The southern portion of Ruffin Canyon Trail is located almost entirely within this creek bed. Heavy rain events result in movement of the cobble stone and muddy conditions within the utility access path.

III. OPPORTUNITIES AND CONSTRAINTS

TRAILS

The southern portion of Ruffin Canyon Trail, south of Shawn Ave. finger Canyon, is unstable with incised channels, large cobble stone that shifts during rain events and accumulation of sediment that also shift during rain events. The upland areas on the eastern side of the canyon pose an opportunity for safe, convenient, and sustainable access in the southern portion of the canyon up to the Escala property. The stakeholders in attendance on February 25th for the field visit were largely, if not unanimously in support of a new trail alignment for the southern segment. Alternatives for the approach when reaching the Escala property were discussed. “Alternative A” would include a realignment of the Escala easement within the canyon to move it from the creek bed/floodplain, to an upland bench on the slope well below (approximately 30 feet) the existing Escala Fig Tree Park. While the City of San Diego has an easement, an agreement would need to be made with Escala HOA and the City to relocate the easement to allow for this trail realignment. An additional consideration is that portions of Ruffin Canyon Trail are used as utility access roads, which must maintain widths of 8 feet.

HABITAT RESTORATION

Many stakeholders support the use of habitat restoration/enhancement as a tool for wildlife and native vegetation preservation, as well as enhancing the aesthetics of trail. Other priorities developed by the stakeholders have been brought forward into the Action Plan below. It should be noted that some stakeholders who live adjacent to the canyon have raised concerns with potential security issues that may come with increased trail use. A potential solution to a security concern that was discussed included volunteer docents or volunteer “canyon watch” program.

IV. ACTION PLAN

The stakeholder group helped create the following priorities for the Ruffin Canyon Enhancement Action Plan:

- A. **Plan and restore and enhance native habitat throughout the canyon.**
 - Restore areas adjacent to trails and other degraded habitat within the canyon
 - Revegetate/restore unapproved social trails
 - Correct erosion issues where unnatural erosion is creating incised channels
 - Non-native palm trees would be removed
 - Plan and replace palm removal areas with native trees and vegetation, e.g. native willows.
- B. **Plan and build a new trail that is outside of the creek bed and floodplain**, within the eastern slope of the canyon
 - **Trail building/realignment areas should favor**
 - Establishing sustainable, convenient, safer multi-use trail conditions for walking, jogging and mountain biking;
 - Establishing trail with gentle slopes
 - Shaded areas (trees or vegetation canopy along trail)
 - Lookout/Viewpoints
 - **New Trail Alternative A**
 - Both alternatives A and B would use a sustainable, practical, and enjoyable alignment along the eastern slope of Ruffin Canyon from approximately the Shawn Canyon intersection to the Escala HOA property to the south.
 - **Alternative “A”** would require securing agreement for the relocation of the City of San Diego’s public access easement within the Escala HOA-owned land, to an upland location out of the floodplain/creek bed.
 - Upland trail should maintain a benign distance away from the HOA’s Fig Tree Park. The approximate location discussed by stakeholders would be the line between the landscaped section on the upper half of the slope, and the natural vegetation on the lower half of the slope.
 - If approved/allowed by Escala, alignment be would coordinated with Escala landscaping committee/crews for use of trail to maintain Escala landscaping areas.
 - Examine potential to allow Escala to install a lock on the existing pedestrian gate that would be locked to prevent entrance through the Escala HOA from sunset to dawn. Gate would allow trail users to exit Escala property at all times;
 - **New Trail Alternative B**
 - **Alternative “B”** would include a segment of trail that linked the new upland trail along the eastern slope (remaining within City property) to the existing easement through the Escala HOA property in the floodplain below.
 - **Other Trail Enhancements**
 - Plan/install way-finding signs at trail intersections to indicate trail names and direct canyon users to points of interest such as Taft Middle School, Mission Valley, etc.
 - Plan and install kiosk or interpretive signage at key locations;
 - Puncheon bridges as needed;
 - **Opportunities to Integrate Enhancements with the Taft Joint-Use Field Development**
 - School District is receptive and is planning on adding a roll away section of fence in the Joint Use Field project. Within the fence, the project will be circumvented by an ADA trail. At back end of the project, behind a proposed stage area where the views of Ruffin Canyon are spectacular, a roll away fence will be installed to allow access for ADA *outside* the fence in “lookout” area perhaps the size of a mini-park.

- School District has agreed to establish an MOU (or similar vehicle) with the City allowing continued public access at the trail east of Taft Middle School that crosses a small part of their property. They plan to do this as part of the Joint Use Agreement.
- Bowlby is in communication on these items with Lee Dulgeroff, Facilities Planning and Construction, San Diego Unified School District, ldulgeroff@sandi.net
- **Other Action Plan Items**
 - Transfer Library Canyon on the north side of Gramercy from “Park” to City “Open Space” designation;
 - Follow through on SDGE willingness to allow public footpath through their land in Sandrock Canyon;
 - Create and Revise Action Plan Map as needed.

V. REQUIRED PERMITS AND AGREEMENTS

Escala HOA Easement Relocation/Amendment

Alternative A suggests easement relocation out of the floodplain onto the slope well below Fig Tree Park. Alternative B requires no changes to the Escala easement as the trail proposed along the upland bench on the east side of the canyon would drop down to the original Escala easement in the floodplain. To realign the easement within the Escala property (Alternative A), the Escala HOA and the City of San Diego must be in agreement and the new easement would need to be documented.

Permit Requirements

The land in San Diego’s canyons, including Ruffin Canyon is designated as “Environmentally Sensitive Land” per the City of San Diego and all applicable regulations must be complied with during Action Plan implementation including the California Environmental Quality Act (CEQA), a Site Development Permit from the City of San Diego would be required, and possibly a Grading Permit for any approved trail building. Plan implementation, close coordination with the City of San Diego will need to occur to ensure trail enhancements are consistent with utility access requirements, where trails are within utility access roads.

Additionally, resource agencies including the United States (U.S.) Fish and Wildlife Service, California Department of Fish and Wildlife, California Regional Water Quality Control Board, and the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers have regulations applicable where wetlands and sensitive habitats are involved, and permits may be required for proposed enhancement projects. However, the San Diego River Conservancy does have the necessary CEQA and agency permitting to remove non-native plant species from the wetlands and plant native plant species in their place if needed. Also, there is a CEQA Exemption for restoration of upland habitats if the sole purpose of the project is habitat restoration or enhancement.

Select photographs of enhancement areas are pasted below.

VI. Photographs



Incised channel created by unnatural erosion



Incised channel created by unnatural erosion



Trail within creek bed consisting of large, uneven cobble bottom



Example of utility access within Ruffin Canyon



Portion of eastern slope in which trail would be relocated well below Fig Tree Park, if approved by HOA,