



San Antonio River Improvements Project



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RIVER IMPROVEMENTS TO PROVIDE CITY WITH LIMITLESS BENEFITS

Enhancements add to environmental, economic, recreational and cultural attributes of the city

SAN ANTONIO – A ten-year project to develop the full potential of the San Antonio River is focusing on improving two sections of the river that pose different challenges. These enhancements are expected to have far-reaching benefits for all of San Antonio – from increased economic development to cultural resources and recreational opportunities connecting neighborhoods.

The \$140-million San Antonio River Improvements Project targets the four-mile Museum Reach, which is north of the downtown area, and the nine-mile Historic Mission Reach, which is south of downtown. The project aims to provide stable, maintainable flood control while increasing recreational and economic development opportunities for the community. Specific objectives for the Museum Reach include extending the amenities of the River Walk into areas that are currently inaccessible because of sheer banks, vegetative growth and lack of pathways. The Historic Mission Reach, however, has little vegetation and few original topographical features remaining. The project in this area aims to restore native habitat and the natural meander of the river, along with developing new recreational opportunities.

ENVIRONMENTAL RESTORATION

Efforts to address flooding in San Antonio between the 1920s and 1960s focused both on the downtown area and beyond. During this time, the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers extensively widened the river channel south of downtown and also straightened its path. These flood control measures removed physical features and vegetation, straightened the river's naturally winding course and lined the channel with concrete rubble, leaving a flat pathway for the river's flow.

The River Improvements Project will provide stable, maintainable flood control while reclaiming the river's natural meanders and appearance along the Historic Mission Reach – which runs from South Alamo Street to Mission Espada. This will be accomplished through the use of fluvial geomorphology, which is the science of how rivers and streams function. Project designers plan to re-create the contoured path of the river wherever possible, restore the gradually descending slopes of the riverbanks and remove the concrete rubble lining the river channel. At several points along the Historic Mission Reach, stacked pieces of limestone will be used to create small dams, or weirs, in order to prevent erosion of the river bottom.

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From Lexington Street to U.S. Highway 281, in the Museum Reach of the project, the river flows through a narrow channel with sloping banks covered by thick vegetation. The channel averages 80 feet in width and is bordered largely by private properties that contain commercial and light industrial businesses which do not currently utilize the riverbank space. From Highway 281 North to Hildebrand, the Museum Reach has a more natural setting, as it flows through Brackenridge Park.

In these areas north of downtown, the River Improvements Project will create designated wildlife habitat areas, and the river bottom will be lined with natural cobblestones to create a healthier environment for fish and other aquatic organisms. The River Improvements Project will help restore native fish communities including Guadalupe bass, blue gill, channel catfish, sunfish and shad.

The River Improvements Project will also re-introduce native trees, grasses and plant life along the river's edge including pecan, redbud and wild olive trees, buttonbush shrubs, Texas bluebonnets and scarlet sage among others. The preservation and planting of native plants including seed and fruit producing species – such as oak, pecan and walnut – will encourage wildlife to forage within these areas along the river. The planting of native understory species will also provide stratification along the river, which is essential to attracting species that would not use the area if only overstory canopy plant species were present.

ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT

The Museum and Historic Mission reaches of the river have very different market potentials associated with them, but in both cases the River Improvements Project will enhance economic development potential and real estate values. The project is expected to stimulate new development and rejuvenate existing properties along the river, and will reinforce a sense of community in both areas. This development will encourage job growth and an increased tax base for the city, the county and area schools.

The primary goal of the Museum Reach is to link cultural institutions and commercial centers through a linear park that will encourage additional economic development at street level. The Museum Reach will see a newly landscaped river channel, with water and walkways that would be visible from potential apartment and condominium balconies and café terraces. The project aims to provide public access to the river and introduce passenger barge traffic between Lexington and Grayson Avenue. The creation of pedestrian and barge traffic along the lower half of the Museum Reach is expected to lay the groundwork for possible commercial, residential and retail construction in the area.

The Museum Reach will become an ideal location for multi-family residential development along with small businesses and restaurants, shops, and coffee houses. The area can support both rental apartments and for-sale condominium units with the most attractive development opportunities falling directly along the river, but in time expanding to the blocks behind the river corridor. Limited hotel and entertainment development may also be possible, depending largely on the ability to extend the barge system into the Museum Reach of the river. The highest land values in San Antonio are along the river in the downtown area, and there is potential for significant positive impact on surrounding land as the river is improved.

The Historic Mission Reach will see enhanced quality of life through improved recreational opportunities. Over time this will raise property values of land closer to the river and will increase demand for new and revitalized real estate development, thus creating a more desirable living and working environment for area residents.

To maximize economic development potential in the Historic Mission Reach, visible water will be established in this section of the river, where currently the riverbed is nearly dry at times. The River Improvements Project calls for bodies of water to be developed that could vary from two to three times the width of the base flow channel, depending on the ability to widen the main channel at that point.

Office development, including the SBC corporate campus currently exist on the river north of downtown. It is possible that companies moving to San Antonio may consider the improved 13-miles of river for a new corporate headquarters, especially in the Historic Mission Reach given the large parcels of land. Retail development is also likely, with heavy concentration at major intersections along the river reaches.

RECREATION

Continuous pedestrian paths creating 13 miles of linear park will be an integral part of the River Improvements Project. Bicycles and walking will become both a practical means of transportation as well as a recreational option for San Antonians. The pathways will be located near or at the top of flood banks in most locations but will also dip down toward the channel banks for short distances. A second pathway is also envisioned that will consist of smaller “earth trails” taking pedestrians closer to the river’s edge. Overlooks and picnic areas will be placed appropriately for interesting views and connections to the environment. Safe nighttime use of the river paths will also be accommodated with the appropriate application of lighting. For residents enjoying the new park space, the feel will be similar to Town Lake in Austin.

Enhancements to the Historic Mission Reach of the river will also support recreational activities, such as birding, jogging, bicycling and canoeing. Limestone dams will have openings in the center to allow paddle canoes or kayaks to pass through, without lessening the effectiveness of the erosion control.

CULTURAL CONNECTIONS

Design solutions on the river will enhance appreciation and enjoyment of the river’s historic significance in the life and development of San Antonio. Pathways will be continuous along the river, on both sides where possible. The pathways will interface with other systems as much as possible, including the Mission Trails, and will include linkages to the Spanish missions. Among the more significant projects related to the missions will be the restoration and protection of several of the Spanish colonial irrigation ditches, or acequias, and an effort to reduce flooding caused by the Espada Dam in adjacent neighborhoods.

In the Museum Reach, project architects and engineers are planning the construction of a dam at Brooklyn Avenue, which would create sufficient water levels to allow passenger barges to navigate farther north, allowing for linkages to cultural landmarks including the San Antonio Museum of Art.

Pathways will also encourage connections farther north to Brackenridge Park and the Witte Museum. A gathering place near the headwaters of the San Antonio River will also be introduced for education and celebration purposes.

ABOUT THE RIVER IMPROVEMENTS PROJECT

The San Antonio River Improvements Project represents a 10-year, \$140 million city, county, and federal investment in flood control, amenities, environmental restoration and recreational improvements to the river. Bexar County and the City of San Antonio are providing local funding with the federal project components funded through the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers (COE). The San Antonio River Authority (SARA) provides project and technical management and overall project coordination.

The design phase of the River Improvements Project consists of preliminary design and detailed design. Preliminary design services, including a public input phase, are estimated to cost \$3.3 million and will be completed in early 2003. Final design and construction will be initiated in phases during the ten years of the project, occurring on both the Museum Reach and the Historic Mission Reach simultaneously.

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