



San Antonio River Improvements Project



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RIVER IMPROVEMENTS PROJECT TO REFRESH STORIED PAST OF THE HISTORIC SAN ANTONIO RIVER

SAN ANTONIO – The San Antonio River has been the heart of our community for hundreds of years and is the primary reason for the city’s origin. The San Antonio River Improvements Project aims to take portions of the historic river back in time to their unspoiled past by partially restoring physical features from a period before modern development and flood control measures altered the river’s landscape. The project’s initiative to re-introduce native trees, vegetation and natural topographical elements is expected to restore some of the natural look and function to the river and the ecosystem.

Archaeological excavations have produced evidence that the first human habitation along the San Antonio River occurred as long as 10,000 years ago. In recent centuries, hunting and gathering groups, known collectively by historians as Coahuiltecons, lived along the river and named it Yanaguana. The first documented arrival of Spanish explorers at the river did not occur until the end of the 1600s. On June 13, 1691, members of a Spanish expedition celebrated Mass on the banks of the river, during which Franciscan priest Damien Massanet renamed the waterway San Antonio because it was the Feast Day of Saint Anthony.

The five missions established in the 1700s along the river by the Spaniards made extensive use of the water supply. Limited rainfall made the missions dependent upon irrigation to grow and harvest crops. The Spanish missionaries designed a system of irrigation ditches, or acequias, to carry water from the river and its tributaries. The Spaniards and mission Indians built a 15-mile network that irrigated approximately 3,500 acres of land and allowed the mission Indians to grow sustaining crops including corn and beans.

Several remnants of the acequia system remain intact along the river today, particularly in the Historic Mission Reach of the River Improvements Project. The San Juan Acequia, which is still functioning and was recently restored, holds the oldest water rights in the state. There are also a number of archaeologically significant areas in the Museum Reach, north of downtown. A portion of the River Improvements Project focuses on identifying these sites and taking steps to protect and preserve them as project work proceeds.

Throughout the 1800s, the San Antonio River served as a central element in the social and economic development of the city. A severe flood in 1819 caused some of the more prominent settlers to relocate to the La Villita area, because it was on the higher east bank of the river. By 1850,

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the river was powering waterworks and mills, feeding irrigation ditches, providing drinking water, putting out fires and carrying sewage downstream. An influx of German and other European immigrants during the middle of the century led to further settlement in the La Villita area, as well as the development of the residential area along the river, which is known today as the King William Historic District. In 1859 Carl Guenther purchased a mill site across the river from the King William area, which has been the site of the Pioneer Flour Mill headquarters ever since. The original Lone Star Brewery complex was also built along the River on Jones Avenue in 1884. The brewery facility today is the location of the San Antonio Museum of Art.

Another severe flood in 1921 marked the next major turning point in the history and development of the river. Torrential rainfall created flooding that left nine feet of water on Houston Street in the downtown area, killed 50 people and caused millions of dollars in damage. The Olmos Dam was completed in 1927 and the Great Bend Cut-Off, which was built as a flood bypass channel to divert water past the downtown river bend, was completed in 1929. This same year, local architect Robert H. H. Hugman presented his proposal to city leaders for creating the 'Shops of Romula and Aragon,' or what would eventually become the sidewalks, footbridges, and park-like amenities that comprise the Paseo del Rio, or the River Walk. Hugman's vision became reality between 1938 and 1941 as a Works Progress Administration (WPA) project. Casa Rio became the first restaurant to open on the River Walk in 1946, but the downtown river area remained largely free of commercial development until the 1960s, when much was built in preparation for the 1968 HemisFair, the first international exposition held in the southwestern United States. The event also brought about the construction of an artificial extension of the river to connect the River Walk to the city's new convention center.

In 1946 another devastating flood hit San Antonio, which prompted the federal government through the Corps of Engineers to assist with flood control projects on the San Antonio River and its tributaries. Between the 1960s and the 1980s, the Corps of Engineers extensively widened the river channel south of downtown and also straightened its path. This work included the removal of vegetation, soil and trees along the river in order to create a trapezoidal drainage channel that could better accommodate excess floodwaters and allow them to flow out of the area more easily. This generally solved the flooding problems along the San Antonio River, but damaged the natural beauty and environment of the river.

An engineering project began in 1987 to further increase the protection of the downtown area against the potential of unprecedented, catastrophic flooding. A tunnel was built 140 feet below the streets of the city to redirect floodwater under downtown in the event of overwhelming storms. The San Antonio River Tunnel was completed in 1997 at a cost of \$111 million. The tunnel is approximately three miles long. Its inlet is located south of the Brackenridge Park golf course at U.S. Highway 281, and its outlet is located south of downtown near Lone Star Boulevard, where it re-enters the San Antonio River.

Today the San Antonio River is proceeding through the ten-year River Improvements Project that represents a \$140 million city, county and federal investment in flood control, amenities, environmental restoration and recreational improvements to the river. The project aims to provide stable, maintainable flood control while increasing recreation and economic development opportunities for the community.

Improvements on the Historic Mission Reach will focus on ecosystem restoration to return the river a more naturally meandering appearance using a technique known as fluvial geomorphology. This technique replicates the original look of the river while increasing flood control protection, reducing erosion and creating an environment more suitable for recreation and wildlife. Additional objectives for the Historic Mission Reach include the construction of hike and bike paths; re-introduction of trees and other vegetation; creation of wildlife habitat areas; establishment of recreational activities, such as canoeing; links to historically significant areas along the Mission Trails and economic development.

Improvements on the Museum Reach will focus on flood control and setting the framework for urban development with a continuous pedestrian link. Proposed improvements for the Museum Reach include pedestrian access from the street level, a continuation of the River Walk's pathways, plant and fish habitats, and the capacity for river barge usage.

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