

Community-Based Transportation Planning Grants

San Rafael Canalfront Conceptual Design Plan

- **Grant Amount:** \$140,000
- **Grant Recipient:** City of San Rafael
- **County:** Marin

Project Area – There are two neighborhoods in the project area: the Canal Neighborhood to the south of the waterway, and the Montecito Neighborhood to the north of the Canal waterway.

Project Focus – The proposed project is a Canalfront Conceptual Design Plan to address two of the transportation solutions identified in the recently-completed *Canal Neighborhood Community-Based Transportation Plan* (2006), funded with a grant from the Metropolitan Transportation Commission. The two projects are a Canalfront Paseo (walkway) along the Canal waterway, and a Canal Crossing to better connect the Canal Neighborhood with the rest of the city.

The Canal is widely recognized as an under-utilized community resource and, in many ways, can be thought of as an open space - a public amenity for all the neighborhoods of San Rafael. It also provides a much sought after literal connection to the San Rafael and San Francisco Bays and the San Francisco Bay Trail (a project of the Association of Bay Area Governments to develop a trail around the perimeter of San Francisco and San Pablo Bays).

Project Goals – For over 30 years, the San Rafael community has dreamed of a better looking and more-accessible

waterfront along the Canal waterway. The walk from the Canal neighborhood to Montecito Shopping Center, San Rafael High School, Downtown and the Transit Center is an unpleasant journey, and one that residents have long advocated to improve. Residents and boaters alike recognize the important role the maritime businesses and activities have in creating the vitality of the waterway. As places such as Montecito Shopping Center and Seafood Peddler improved their businesses, people have seen the possibilities for more public access to the waterfront. These dreams and ideas resulted in two policies and two programs in San Rafael General Plan 2020 that set the stage for planning for the canalfront.



Community Outreach – The City Council solicited applications and appointed 19 people to a Canalfront Advisory Committee to prepare a Canalfront Conceptual Design Plan. The members represented a diverse group of interests: residents, business owners, boaters, and community leaders. In the summer of 2008, the committee members learned about the Canal by touring the waterway by boat, visiting City-owned sites along the waterfront, and hearing about projects already underway. Committee members worked with the community-based organization

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Canal Welcome Center to publicize and present two planning workshops. In October, the committee held its first community workshop to share what had been learned, and to start work on a vision of what might be possible along the waterfront. After developing several options of improvements, the committee hosted a second community workshop in spring of 2009. The committee then refined the ideas into a draft which members shared with constituency groups in focus group meetings over the summer of 2009. After making final revisions, the Canalfront Advisory Committee unanimously endorsed the plan to the City Council. In November 2009, the City Council unanimously adopted a resolution to accept the plan.

Project Outcome- The San Rafael Canalfront Conceptual Plan is the result of an 18-month community-based planning process to envision a beautiful and fun waterfront along the San Rafael Canal. The plan is the result of extensive public outreach, hundreds of comments from the community, a thorough analysis of existing conditions and issues, and public review of multiple alternative plans. The Design Plan sets

the stage for creating a “paseo” through one of the most dynamic communities in the Bay Area. The Plan envisions providing and improving access to and along the water’s edge for all of San Rafael’s residents and visitors. The plan is based on four visioning elements:

- The Canalfront Paseo is an enjoyable, safe and attractive way to travel from Pickleweed Park to Pt. San Pedro Road.
- The waterway has wonderful boating opportunities.
- Being on the canal waterfront is a unique experience.
- The Canal ecosystem is restored.

Recommendations include providing clear and open views toward the open space of the Canal, which will strengthen the area’s unique waterfront identity. The Plan identifies the most appropriate way to travel through an auto-dominated area, the best ways to access the Canal waterfront, and the most suitable crossing improvements. A companion document to the Plan is the design guidelines regarding the design of new buildings in the plan area, and desired waterfront amenities.

Challenges

- Commercial businesses, yacht harbors, high density housing and single family homes line the Canal, yet many residents and visitors to the area do not know that the Canal exists. In addition, some buildings in the area have deteriorated over time or are reaching the end of their expected life span. Others have been developed, renovated and re-purposed without clear direction as to how to engage with and acknowledge the canalfront.

Successes

- The Conceptual Plan sets forth a vision and ideas for canalfront improvements. The vision provides a road map toward the future, giving direction of where the community wants to go, and the chance to control some of the changes that will come. The Plan identifies the most appropriate way to travel through an auto-dominated area, the best ways to access the Canal waterfront, and the most suitable crossing improvements.