

## CHAPTER 12: DOWNTOWN DELTA



FIGURE 12.1 Clockwise from left: Existing birds eye view, Downtown Delta; Second estuary; Mission water cistern and filtration building; Eastwood Park on Main Street; N. Olive Street, Westside community; Ventura River Trail, Westside community.



# DOWNTOWN DELTA

## EXISTING CONDITIONS

The broadest portion of the Ventura River Valley - referred to here as the Downtown Delta – is an area with considerable urbanization and relatively flat terrain that is quartered by Highway 101 and Highway 33. It encompasses existing portions of the Westside community, the downtown historical corridor, and the downtown western beach area. This Plan proposes four design sites within these three neighborhoods: the Westpark Access, Ortega Zócalo, the Ventura County Fairgrounds, and the Ventura River Parkway Interpretive Center. The name Downtown Delta reflects both the presence of the Ventura River delta and the spatial form formed by the four proposed downtown sites.

## Westside Community

Currently, the Westside community experiences limited access to the natural and cultural resources of Ventura. The Ventura River, the Ventura levee, and Highway 33 border the neighborhood on the west. While the levee and the highway provide significant benefits to the city, they also act as barriers that prevent physical access to, and limit experiential knowledge of, the Ventura River. To the east, the Westside community is bounded by hillsides which are a valuable natural resource for Ventura. However, as no trails or roads provide access between the Westside community and the hillsides, access to this natural resource is limited. The effect of these natural and manmade boundaries is that interaction between members of the Westside community, the river, and the hillsides, is discouraged.

## Downtown Historical Corridor

The Downtown Ventura historical corridor is a vibrant urban streetscape, where up-scale shops, thrift stores, professional services, and restaurants with sidewalk dining line pedestrian-friendly blocks averaging 500 feet in length. Along Main Street, which is the location of many historical buildings, passing pedestrians are protected from slow-moving traffic by

FIGURE 12.2 Location of proposed Downtown Delta site.

rows of angled parking along both sides of the street. Additional shopping and dining venues are located on intersecting streets. Public parking structures and lots which are tucked behind the Main Street corridor are also easily accessible to visitors and workers. This area is a significant and rich part of Ventura's culture and has been enhanced by the preservation and restoration of historical resources. However, despite its historical linkage to the Ventura River, the downtown area currently does not highlight its connection to the river.

### Downtown Western Beach Area

This document identifies the Ventura County Fairgrounds, the Ventura River's estuary, wetland and dune habitats, Emma Wood State Beach Group Camp, the secondary estuary, and the Ventura Beach R.V. Resort as the western beach area. This area is home to vital habitat, historical and recreational resources, and is central to Ventura's tourism industry. The Omer Rains coastal trail passes along the coast and alongside the estuary at the primary mouth of the river. Nearby resources outside the planning area include a marine kelp forest, the location of a former Chumash village, Surfers' Point (a popular point break for surfing and kite surfing), Seaside Park (a city park), Seaside Wilderness State Park (historically known as Hobo Jungle), the Ventura Pier, and the Crown Plaza Hotel-Ventura.

### DESIGN CONCEPTS

The first proposed site is Westpark Access, located at the northernmost part of the Downtown Delta. This is a small area that includes a portion of the Ventura levee and Westpark, a neighborhood park in the Westside community. Design proposals for this area emphasize increased access



FIGURE 12.3 Existing conditions at Downtown Delta site. Orthophotography: CIRGIS.

between the Westside community and the proposed Lower Ventura River Parkway.

The second site, Ortega Zócalo, lies directly south of Westpark Access. Due to its location, the Zócalo can be a significant link between several of Ventura's neighborhoods and the proposed parkway. A combination of enhancements at the Westpark Access and Ortega Zócalo can help remediate some of the environmental challenges affecting the Westside Community.

The third site, Ventura County Fairgrounds, is an area of significant ecological resources east of the Ventura River mouth, encompassing the fairgrounds, the Ventura River estuary, former wetlands, and the beach area near Surfer's Point. This site presents multiple opportunities for

strengthening the ecological infrastructure of the region while reducing maintenance costs.

The fourth proposed site, Ventura River Parkway Interpretive Center, is located west of the Ventura River and estuary. This area encompasses Emma Wood State Beach and Group Camp Site, and the Ventura Beach Recreational Vehicle Resort. Because this site has existing graded areas adjacent to wetlands and river channels, facilities devoted to education about local ecosystems could be built and operated here without disturbing unimproved ground. Moreover, the location of this site, next to an interstate highway at the southern entrance to the proposed parkway, makes it ideal for introducing travelers to the proposed parkway and the river.



- ① Westpark Access
- ② Downtown Delta
- ③ Ventura River Parkway Interpretive Center
- ④ Ventura County Fairgrounds

FIGURE 12.4 Proposed plan, Downtown Delta. Orthophotography: CIRGIS.

# Westpark Access Point



FIGURE 12.5 Location of Westpark Access site.



FIGURE 12.6 Westpark picnic area and tot-lot.



FIGURE 12.7 Ventura River from the Ventura Levee.



FIGURE 12.8 Westpark from the Ventura Levee.



FIGURE 12.9 Existing Conditions, Westpark. Orthophotography CIRGIS.

## EXISTING CONDITIONS

Westpark is a popular gathering place for Westside residents: sports fields, picnic areas, an indoor community center and an elementary school adjacent to the park make this site a social nexus. The western edge of Westpark is less than 250 feet from the eastern bank of the Ventura River, yet this site, and the Westside generally, is completely cut off from the river by Highway 33 and the Ventura Levee. Thus, the community is currently missing out on an opportunity for school field trips, wildlife observation, and river stewardship programs for adults and youth centering on the school and community center.

- ① Community Center
- ② Tot-lot
- ③ Picnic area
- ④ Sports fields
- ⑤ Skate bowl

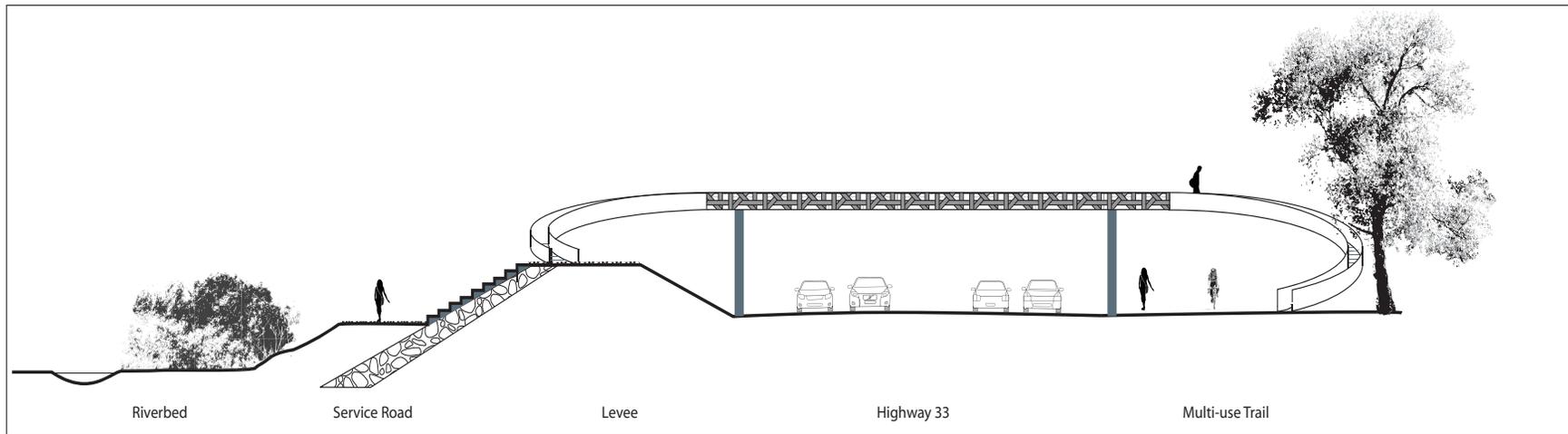


FIGURE 12.10 *Elevated freeway crossing.*

## DESIGN CONCEPTS

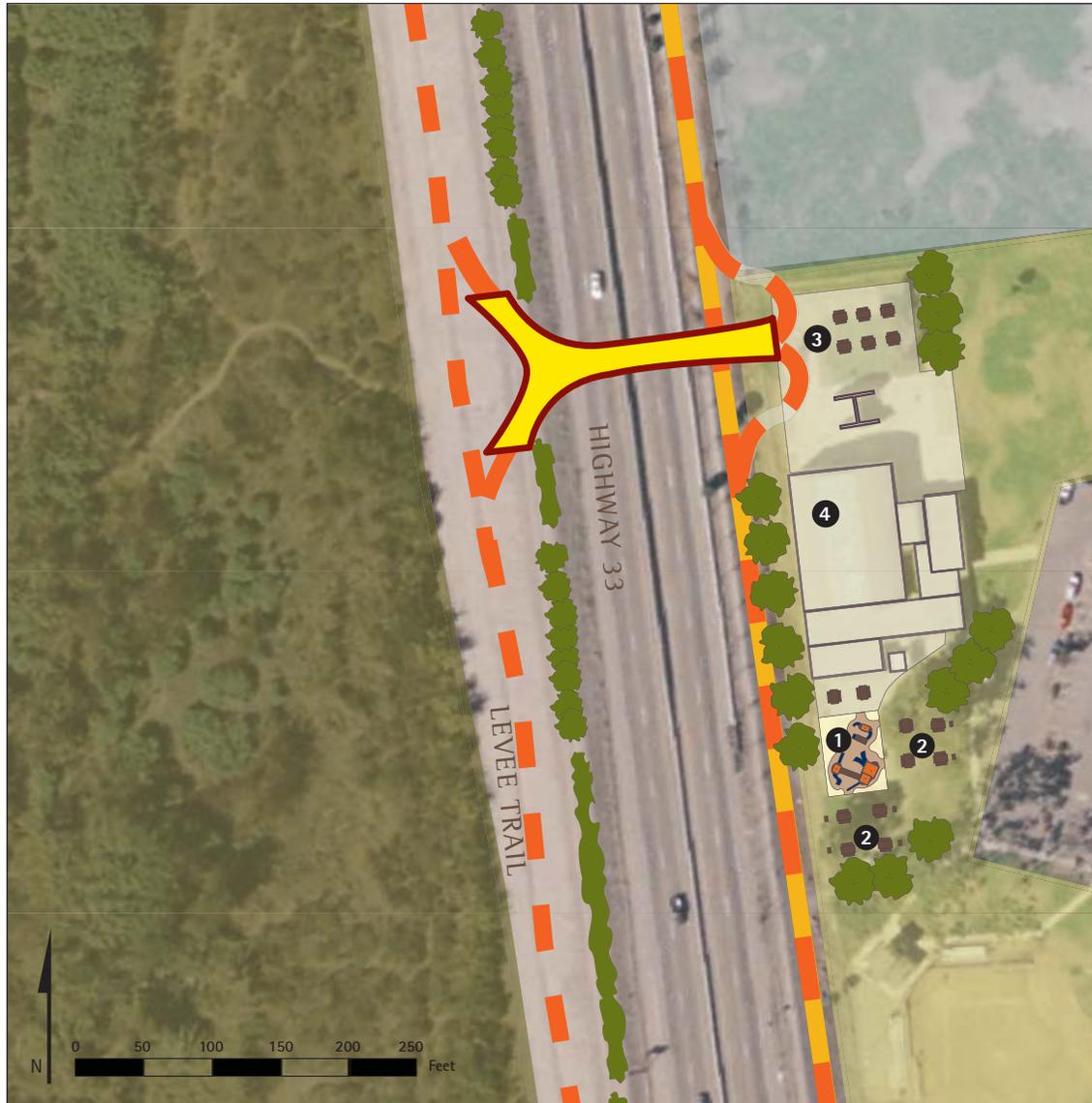
Providing access points between the Westside community and the Ventura River is an opportunity to increase open space recreation and ecological resources for members of that community. An elevated freeway crossing from Westpark to a multi-use trail on the Ventura River levee, accessible by pedestrians and cyclists, could provide easy access from the local community while preserving existing park programming.

Improvements on the levee side of the elevated freeway crossing would contribute to a pleasant trail use experience. Vegetated levees can be fully functional provided their footprint is approximately double the size of concrete levees (Interview with Joe Lampara, 2008). Highway 33 may be a constraint on widening the levee in this area, but the addition of plant material may be feasible without such widening, and would create shade, break-up horizontal planes, and provide views of the chaparral ecosystem where it meets the riparian ecosystem. Using low growing plant varieties and maintaining the lowest tree branches above eight feet would ensure that visibility is not compromised. Using contained, below-grade planting beds and boxed elements can aid in preventing structural damage to the levee from vegetative root systems. The levee is currently being assessed for certification by the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) (O'Brien and Glenn 2010). Vegetating the levee and other proposed improvements would need to be carefully considered from the engineering standpoint and from the standpoint of its effect on the certification process.

Two popular community activities, soccer and outdoor gatherings, could be enhanced through preservation and improvement of existing gathering spaces such as the small picnic area near the Westpark Community Center, and the provision of additional soccer fields at the nearby Ortega Zócalo. Additional park programming, including nature walks for sports teams, public art on the freeway crossing, and a Community Pride festival that includes maintenance competitions, can also be incorporated as improvements to this site.



FIGURE 12.11 *Perspective, multi-use levee trail.*



- ① Tot-lot
- ② Picnic area
- ③ Outdoor educational area
- ④ Community center
- Barbecue pit and grill
- Table and benches
- ⊥ Handball court
- Multi-use trail
- ⋯ Nature trail
- Y Elevated freeway crossing
- Sheridan Way School grounds
- Westpark grounds
- Ventura River floodway

FIGURE 12.12 Plan, Westpark Access Point. Orthophotography: CIRGIS.

# Ortega Zócalo



FIGURE 12.13 Proposed location of Ortega Zócalo.

## EXISTING CONDITIONS

The natural and cultural features bounded by West Park Row Avenue, Highway 101, Ventura Avenue and the Ventura River give this area the potential to be an attractive connector between Main Street, the Ventura River, the beach, and the Westside community. The area has many resources including satellite medical facilities of the Ventura County Medical Center and Community Memorial Hospital of San Buenaventura, manufacturing and industrial facilities, the Ortega Adobe Historical Residence, the

Bilingual Vocational Center training school, Mission Plaza Shopping Center, retail establishments, and residential housing.

This site should be a bridge between downtown and the river, but features of the site act as barriers and disrupt cultural connectivity. In comparison to the nearby Omer Rains Trail and a vibrant Main Street, this area, with limited streetscaping, disparate building types, and parking lot frontages, seems forgotten and unprogrammed. Wide streets, large asphalt parking lots, and big blank walls overwhelm the human scale.

Travel through this area creates diminished sensory experiences that stand in contrast to pleasant nearby neighborhoods. Sidewalks that lack physical barriers to automobile traffic of moderate speed challenge the comfort and safety of foot traffic, and pedestrian right-of-ways are not always contiguous with destination locations. The blocks between West Park Row Avenue and Main Street have a confusing layout, with streets that do not line-up with one another and unclear distinctions between private driveways and public streets. This absence of spatial clarity is aggravated by precarious pedestrian conditions, parcels with and without setbacks containing dissimilar building sizes in addition to vacant lots, sparse vegetation, extensive asphalt, and the occasional eyesores provided by construction sites with piles of disturbed earth. Further



FIGURE 12.14 Homeless encampment in stand of *Arundo donax* in the Ventura River north of Main Street Bridge.



FIGURE 12.15 Highway 33 on ramp.



FIGURE 12.16 Main entry Mission Plaza also the intersection of Main Street and S. Garden Street.



FIGURE 12.17 Existing conditions at proposed location of Ortega Zócalo. Orthophotography CIRGIS.

- 1 *Arundo donax* stand
- 2 Storm drain outfall
- 3 Ortega Adobe Historic Residence
- 4 Bilingual Vocational Center
- 5 Mission Plaza Shopping Center
- 6 Medical facilities
- 7 Eastwood Park
- 8 Serra Cross
- 9 San Buenaventura Mission Complex
- 10 Freeway ramps
- 11 Freeway underpass
- 12 Ventura Hillside

challenges to the pedestrian experience in this area include the on-ramp and off-ramp to Highway 33 and the active shopping mall driveway at the intersection of Garden Street and Main Street.

The Westside, of which this site is a part, has been identified by the EPA as an historical brownfield area (West Coast Environmental and Engineering 2001). Reported crimes for the police district corresponding to this area are low (Ventura Police Department 2005). Nevertheless, some

community members perceive the area in and around the riverbed as dangerous (Community Workshop 1, March 2008). In the riverbed, large stands of the invasive plant *Arundo donax* obscure visibility and provide fuel and shelter opportunities for homeless encampments which contribute to the perception of risk. The combination of storm drain outfalls along this portion of the river, untreated waste from homeless encampments, degraded habitat due to invasive plant species, encampment footprints, and the area's brownfield character would also pose health and safety

concerns for potential parkway visitors.

## DESIGN CONCEPTS

This plan refers to the area bounded by W. Park Row Avenue, E. Thompson Boulevard, Ventura Avenue, and the Ventura River as Ortega Zócalo, a name inspired by the Historical Ortega Adobe Residence located in this area and the term *Zócalo*, often used in Mexico for a town or city's central square and community nexus. This Plan recommends three elements for the Ortega Zócalo:





FIGURE 12.18 Plan, Ortega Zócalo district.

a new public open space between the Ventura River and N. Olive Street; a water-treatment-based streetscape and street grid clarification; and an area of mixed-use zoning. These proposals aim to form a cultural bridge between the Lower Ventura River Parkway and downtown by providing mixed-use development at the parkway’s edge that includes features for improving water quality, increasing recreation and access to the river, and increasing cultural awareness of the river. These elements would also connect with a larger revitalization effort that would strive to address the environmental and economic challenges faced by residents of the Westside community .

### Ortega Adobe Park

Proposals for an expanded and improved Ortega Adobe Park would create a developed, universally accessible urban park which would provide both an open space resource for the Westside community and an attractive extension of Main Street. The land adjacent to the Ventura Levee would provide a passive recreation opportunity and an access point to the Ventura Levee Trail. Proposed amenities for this area include a Chumash Ethnobotanical Garden with interpretive elements, surrounded by a strolling garden with picnic areas in large and small niches. Detailed plans for this garden could be developed with guidance from local Chumash bands and ethnobotanical historians. The addition of two soccer fields at the site would help alleviate potential overuse of the fields at Westpark. Like the proposed western portion of Ortega Adobe Park, the area surrounding Ortega Adobe Residence is well-suited to passive recreation, native vegetation, and educational opportunities, such as a learning garden featuring dryland agricultural plants and referencing planting strategies formerly utilized by the Spanish Mission. The gardens could utilize plants and interpretive elements to tell the story of human dependence on the Ventura River. Programming that encourages local school children and interested adults to take active roles in the care and harvest of these plants could further enhance the Ventura community’s connection to local history.

Implementation of these features would require the assessment of some associated properties for potential

environmental hazards, the resolution of at least one ongoing EPA hazardous waste investigation, and potential remediation actions.

Creating this park with sections on both the east and west sides of Highway 33 (figure 12.18) would create a strong visual connection and access point between the urban Westside, the Levee Trail, and the Ventura River. However, in order for this to occur, it would be necessary to overcome the barrier presented by the highway itself. The preferable method, if feasible, would be to excavate several at-grade openings, 50 yards or more in width, beneath the elevated highway and its associated ramps and construct pillar supports for the highway in those spaces. Openings of this size would have the benefit of providing a line of sight between the Westside neighborhood and the Levee Trail, visually unifying the Westside and the river to some extent, while providing pass-through corridors that feel safe. If this is not feasible, one or more elevated freeway crossings could serve these purposes in a more limited manner.

By providing meaningful open space, activity generators, increased vegetative surfaces for stormwater infiltration, and habitat opportunities for native insects and small animals, the Ortega Adobe Park could promote environmental justice for the Westside population, and contribute to the overall value of the Downtown Delta area.

### Streetscapes

The streetscape proposed for the Ortega Zócalo area would incorporate environmentally sensitive and human-friendly features. Throughout the area, proposed streetscapes would provide on- and near-site water treatment as well as improved pedestrian and bicycle circulation. Planning recommendations begin with an effort to create a clarified, compact, and connected street grid for pedestrian and cycle traffic. New east-west public thoroughfares with re-designed pedestrian, cycle, and limited vehicular access are proposed for the area between W. Park Row Avenue and Mission Plaza Shopping Center, as well as an improved linkage connecting North and South Garden Streets through what is currently the Mission Plaza parking lot. Additionally,

the proposed street grid is intended to resemble that of the downtown historical corridor and the Westside community, thereby providing pedestrian-scale walking distances and continuity with the existing streetscape character.

The basic design unit for streetscapes in the area includes a network of filter strips, bio-swales, and small detention areas that mimic larger natural processes in order to reduce untreated wet and dry weather runoff volumes while protecting water quality in the Ventura River. These features replace existing curbs and gutters with permeable surface area between streets and sidewalks, allowing for absorption and physical filtration of runoff. Native materials and plants populate these spaces, providing phytoremediatory services that reduce pollution loads, and reinforce the location's relationship to the river. These plants could be further used as way-finders and educational tools. It is recommended that the distribution of plant material reflect natural distribution patterns. For example, western sycamore (*Platanus racemosa*), which prefers wetter soil conditions, would be used with more frequency closer to the river while island oak (*Quercus tomentella*), which has lower water needs, would be used more extensively further away from the river. In this way, the design would help create a sense of place, an important component in creating desirable

urban spaces.

The pilot Street Edge Alternatives Project (SEA Streets) in Seattle, Washington provides a linear treatment model for just such a streetscape. It is a network of curb-less, vegetated swales and detention areas, with objectives that include reducing untreated runoff volumes into adjacent waterways (Seattle Public Utilities 2008). Initial monitoring reports indicate that runoff volumes were reduced by as much as 66 percent compared with traditional curb and gutter roads, and researchers anticipate an equal or greater reduction in pollutant loading (Horner et al 2002). Figure 12.20 illustrates how this model might be employed in Zócalo area, adjusted for climate differences, particularly the need for drought-tolerance, between Seattle and Ventura.

As illustrated in chapter 7, this linear water treatment network would terminate in modified storm-drain outfalls at the river that would employ native plants in bioremediation swales, cleansing runoff before it is allowed to enter the main river.

Additional streetscape recommendations provide pedestrian and cycle safety, encourage use of mass transit, and further develop connectivity and a sense of place. Implementing

pedestrian crossing facilities on N. Olive Street at the ramp for Highway 33 would mitigate a significant existing barrier to safe, clear pedestrian circulation. Likewise, providing continuous sidewalks and bike lanes at the underpass for Highway 101 on Brooks Avenue would allow increased pedestrian and bicycle passage from the north into the Fairground area, an important consideration in light of the likely importance of the Fairgrounds railroad station for the future expansion of mass transit services.

The new streetscape would feature both angled and parallel parking along major streets in addition to the linear water treatment system discussed above. An angled parking arrangement currently narrows the street and slows automobile traffic on Main Street in the historical corridor, resulting in enhanced pedestrian safety; this arrangement could be continued into the Ortega Zócalo district, increasing design continuity between the neighborhoods. This Plan recommends expanded and increased visibility of bicycle lanes for improved safety, along with use of distinct paving patterns and additional signage. Other recommended elements include appropriately placed lighting, frequent litter receptacles, seating, and transit shelters with seating in close proximity to the housing and services of the Ortega Zócalo mixed-use area.

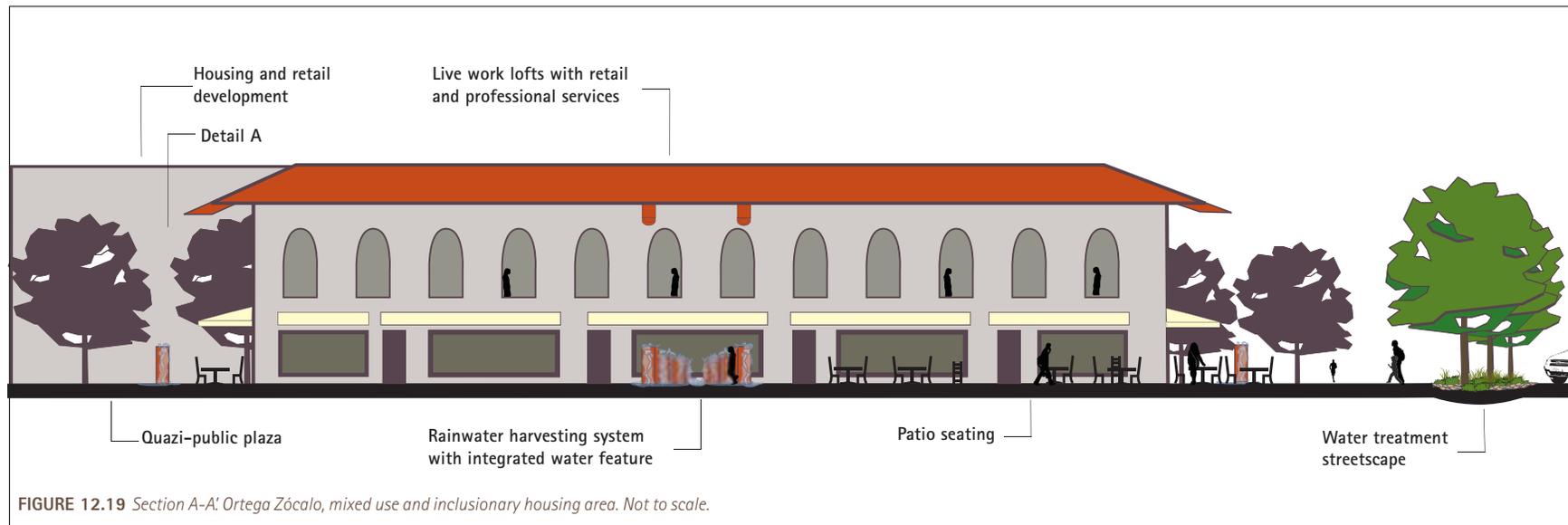


FIGURE 12.19 Section A-A' Ortega Zócalo, mixed use and inclusionary housing area. Not to scale.

Streets provide opportunities for social interaction and community building. Jane Jacobs, an early advocate for strong cities, reflects on the importance of street life in her book *The Death and Life of Great American Cities* (Jacobs 1961). Jacobs observes that self-directed, casual interaction between members of a neighborhood as they run errands or are otherwise out and about in their neighborhood builds “a web of public respect and trust, and a resource in time of personal or neighborhood need... The absence of this trust is a disaster to a city street” (Jacobs 1961). The transformation of the urban area on the eastern banks of the Ventura River from a vehicular-based system to that of a vibrant district connecting people to the Ventura River will require the establishment of such trust.

### Ortega Mixed-Use Development

The San Buenaventura Redevelopment Agency has recommended a private-entity, mixed-use development at the intersection of Garden and Main Streets (SBRD 2006). This mixed-use development would serve a primary purpose of this Vision Plan, that of creating an attractive, walkable connection between downtown and the river. This plan envisions all of the blocks surrounding the intersection as supporting residential spaces in combination with establishments and spaces for goods and services

that meet aspects of life including education, health care, employment, civics, and recreation. The following proposals respond to the particular way in which regional, city and site-scale conditions converge at this site, with a view toward making the development a center for sustainable practices.

### Increased Density and Infill

Many factors such as growth projections, a shortage of affordable housing, SOAR measures, a countywide dependence on private vehicles for long commutes, and Ventura’s stated policy of infill first indicate the need for increased density and infill development that includes low-income and affordable housing. Therefore, this Vision Plan emphasizes the strategies of increased density and infill development for the proposed Ortega Zócalo District mixed-use area. Graduated height requirements would work to prevent new development from overshadowing the character of nearby neighborhoods. Meanwhile, graduated floor plan requirements would ensure that low-income, affordable, market-rate units would be available, encouraging residents from many income groups. Public and quasi-public areas designed with human-friendly elements like seating, sun and shade balance, and water features would invite residents and visitors of the district to utilize the

neighborhood for a variety of purposes including dining, socializing, civic engagement, and work. Spaces which are not open to the public such as rooftops, courtyards, balconies, and patios would provide tenants with both communal and private outdoor opportunities, and should be designed to ensure that residents have adequate privacy. The nearby railroad and Amtrak station, bus line, and bike trails all provide opportunities to reduce dependence on private vehicles. These strategies would provide more sustainable land use patterns than those currently employed in the proposed Zócalo district, and reduce the pressure to site future developments on land in the flood plain currently designated as agriculture and open space.

### Sustainable Design Elements

Design and construction proposals that further detail the Ortega Zócalo site include environmentally sensitive and sustainable systems and technologies. Passive solar and green roofs can reduce heating and cooling needs and absorb rainwater. Installation of solar panels can contribute electricity both to individual buildings and to the power grid. Runoff from hard-surfaced rooftops can be filtered and utilized for nearby landscaping. Wet-weather water features are recommended to replace traditional water features and can be integrated into cisterns. Other building

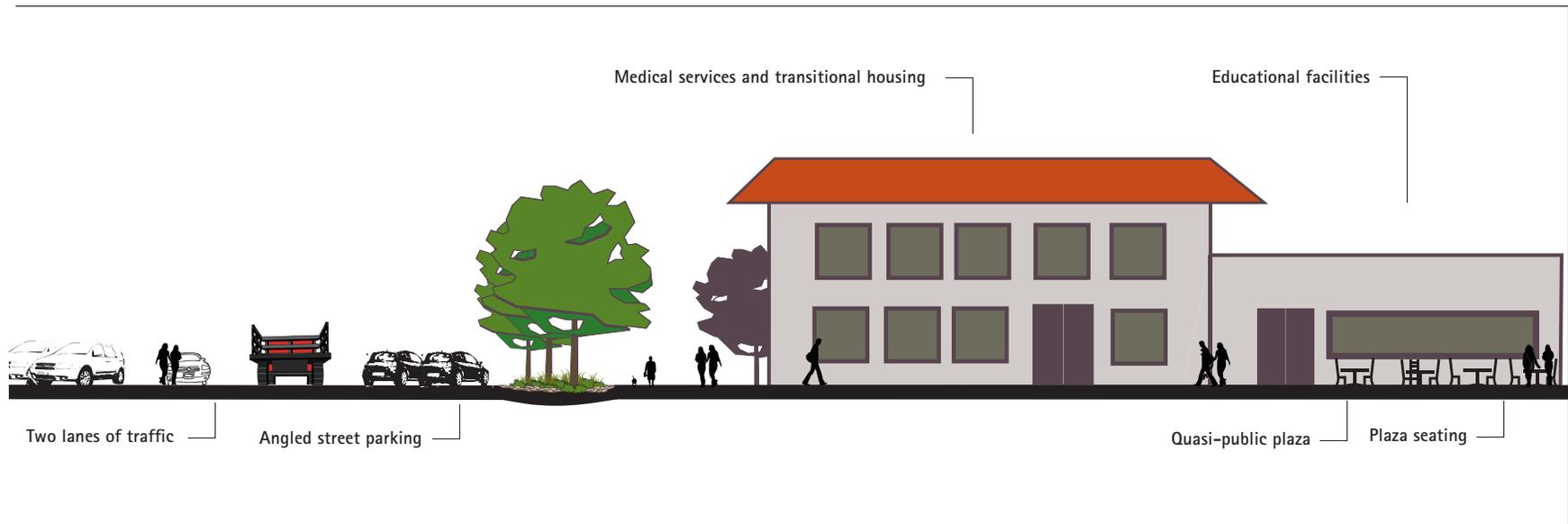




FIGURE 12.20 *Perspective of expanded Adobe Park and streetscape.*

elements to explore include composting toilets and other methods of turning traditional waste streams into end products including fertilizer and energy. These waste stream alternatives would require specific infrastructure investments but would lengthen the life spans of consumed resources, resulting, ultimately in less consumption and more sustainable use patterns.

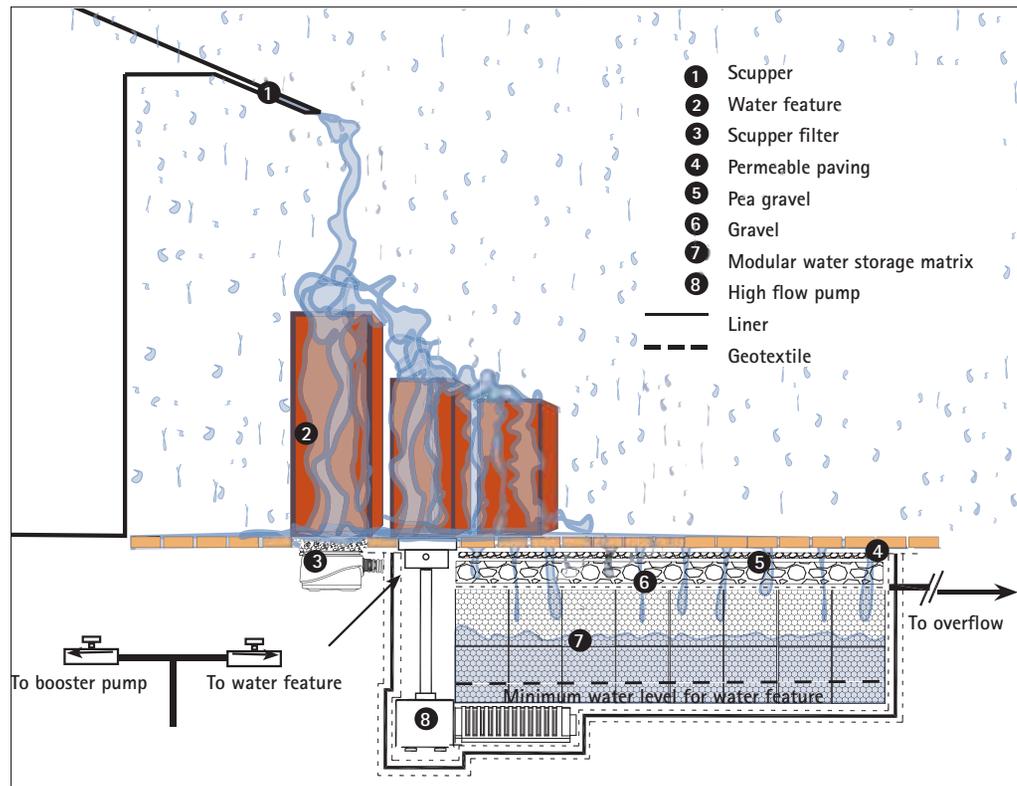
### **Addressing Healthcare, Homelessness, Employment and the Local Economy**

This document envisions healthcare-related services and education as core components of the Ortega Zócalo

district that would help meet the objectives of this Vision Plan. Existing medical facilities on Main Street and Santa Clara Street provide a social and economic theme for the mixed-use development, an appropriate emphasis given current national, regional and local concerns for unmet healthcare needs. Healthcare-oriented development would improve healthcare access for Ventura's growing population while providing jobs and educational opportunities in this growing economic sector. Healthcare education programs in elementary and secondary schools in and near the Zócalo district could prepare interested students for careers in that industry. Those students and others would then have

internship and job opportunities in the Zócalo District with programs for histology, medical billing, and other medical support services. Nursing and doctor training programs would also provide employment and prepare the next generation of skilled medical practitioners.

The healthcare focus of the mixed-use development would further other parkway objectives by supporting efforts to reduce environmental degradation of the Ventura River caused by casual habitation which is an outgrowth of homelessness. These efforts will only have a significant and lasting impact if they address the roots of homelessness in



**FIGURE 12.21** Detail A. Rainwater harvesting system with permeable pavers and integrated water feature. Not to scale. Adapted from: RainXChange Rainwater Harvesting Systems by Aquascape.

the area. The Ventura County Ten Year Plan for Ending Homelessness has established the county's framework for ending homelessness, and this Vision Plan recommends that planning and design efforts for the parkway include individuals and elements tied to the Ten Year Plan as well as homeless individuals themselves. A healthcare-centered economic focus for the Ortega Zócalo could further this objective by providing spaces for a stream of social services attempting to meet medical, educational and housing needs of the homeless population. Healthcare facilities would include a medically-supervised detoxification facility and space for rehabilitation programs. The needs of transitional homeless individuals for general education as well as employment training might be effectively addressed within the educational context provided by the Zócalo with its emphasis on growing healthcare industry jobs. All

of these programs would be tied to transitional housing within the mid-use development itself, in a package of services leading to independent living.

Including a broad package of integrated services to the homeless in the Ortega Zócalo would help to reinforce a sense of place that is unique to this neighborhood, based on its proximity to the Lower Ventura River. Homeless people and other casual outdoor campers, even if unauthorized, have been a part of the landscape of the lower river as far back as the early twentieth century. Campers in the Ventura River are not a "nuisance", like other human beings, they are a part of the landscape in which they live and have compelling reasons for being where they are. Like other human beings from all economic strata who live on the land, they engage in some activities



**FIGURE 12.22** An example of sustainable design technologies, this green roof on the American Society of Landscape Architects headquarter building in Washington D.C. absorbs rainwater and helps to insulate the building below. Source: American Society of Landscape Architects.

that harm the environment. Some of their activities such as camping, campfires and trash disposal, degrade the environment of the river and its associated ecosystems while also causing some visitors to feel unsafe. This is a good reason for discouraging habitation in the riverbed. Providing transitional housing and services within a few blocks of the river would acknowledge the historic connection that homeless individuals have had with this landscape and provide a convenient context for their participation in the planning, construction and maintenance of the parkway as well as stewardship programs connected with it.

The proposed mixed-use area of the Ortega Zócalo, in conjunction with the Ortega Adobe Park and streetscapes, would help connect the proposed parkway, the Westside community, and the greater City of Ventura. The Zócalo district would enrich the city generally by providing walkable streetscapes, healthcare, jobs and commerce. In the meantime, the Zócalo would address the particular environmental justice issues affecting the Westside community by providing an economic driver for the remediation of local brownfields while enabling Westside residents to meet their needs for housing, employment, education, transit, recreation, and access to natural habitat without leaving the neighborhood.

# Ventura County Fairgrounds

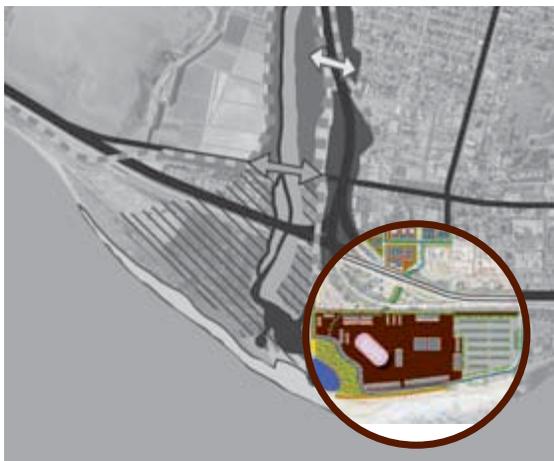


FIGURE 12.23 Proposed location of Ortega Zócalo.



FIGURE 12.24 Ventura County Fairgrounds.



FIGURE 12.25 Ventura County Fairgrounds entrance sign.

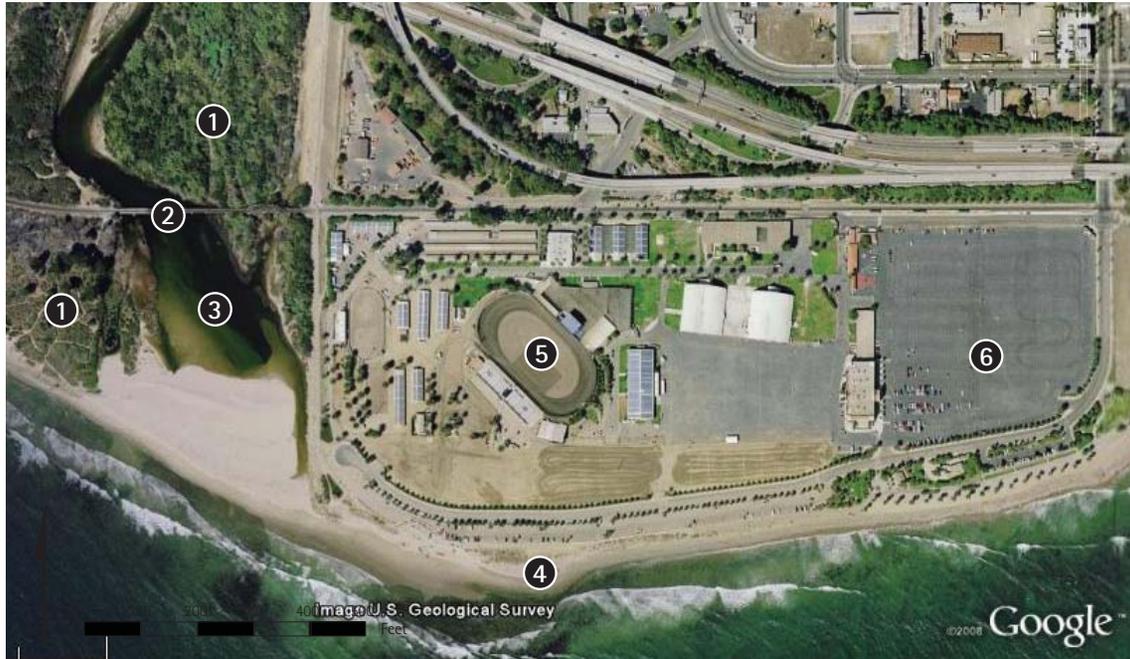
The Ventura County Fairgrounds at Seaside Park is a sixty-two acre site directly east of the Ventura River. A 2,000 space asphalt parking lot lies within the property and also serves an adjacent Amtrak station. The site is currently owned by the State of California and has been in existence for 133 years. The Fairgrounds are intermittently open to the public for events that include the annual Ventura County Fair, Derby Club races, business meetings, trade shows, conventions, and concerts. Otherwise, the Fairgrounds are closed to the public.

According to historical maps, the Fairgrounds are situated atop previous wetlands and estuarine habitat. A current study by the California Coastal Commission, tentatively entitled *Historical Ecology Study: Ventura and South Coast Wetlands*, is underway and, once completed, can further pinpoint the previous extent of these valuable habitats.

The current design of the Ventura County Fairgrounds presents multiple opportunities for employing sustainable practices that will improve the environmental quality, visitor experience, and aesthetic appearance of this location. As

a community resource owned by the State of California, improvements at the Ventura County Fairgrounds can match state, federal, and local objectives for enhancing environmental quality.

This Plan section proposes design ideas for the Fairgrounds site as well as the adjacent estuary, wetlands, and dune ecosystems of Seaside Wilderness Park. These recommendations have the objectives of improving the hydrological, habitat and social quality of this location and the broader areas that interact with this site.



① Wetlands      ② Railroad Trestle      ③ Estuary      ④ Dune      ⑤ Fairgrounds      ⑥ Parking Lot

## EXISTING CONDITIONS Estuary and Wetlands

The Ventura River Estuary and surrounding wetlands are an essential ecological resource, as well as a source of recreation and pleasure for Ventura. The wetlands that lie upstream and surround the estuary are examples of a valuable and fragile watershed component (EPA 2001). Although wetlands occupy only about 5 percent of the land surface of the United States, they are home to 31 percent of California's plant species.

However, the Ventura River Estuary and adjacent wetlands appear to have been greatly diminished as the result of development during the past one-and-one-half centuries. Historical and contemporary imagery of the site provides clues to its earlier, natural habitat as well as evidence of the man-made, physical changes that have been imposed on this ecosystem. A historic survey map from the 1850's shows that the delta of the Ventura River once had a natural "V" shape and suggests that, in addition to the estuary area that exists today, an additional estuary and wetlands area once existed on what is now the Fairgrounds site. The filling and development of the Fairgrounds site brought

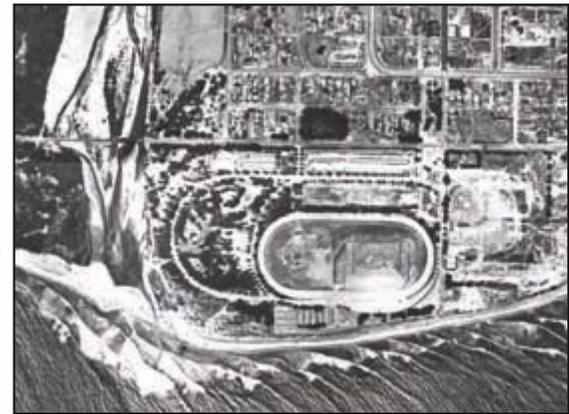
**FIGURE 12.26** Existing conditions Ventura County Fairgrounds and vicinity. Orthophotography: CIRGIS.

civic benefits, but also deprived the area of the ecosystem services that would have been provided by these natural areas. The Ventura River channels that may have supplied this ecosystem have been constrained by the Ventura Levee, and the tributary systems that presumably also supported this ecosystem have been buried underground in conduits and storm drains as the result of the development of Downtown Ventura. However, the current estuary is buffered by wetlands to the north and west, a state beach and the Pacific Ocean to the south, and the Ventura County Fairgrounds at Seaside Park to the east which are sparsely built, suggesting a potential opportunity for at least a partial restoration of this ecosystem.

The Ventura River Estuary attracts many visitors. Situated along the Pacific Flyway, with broad views of the Channel Islands and the coastline, the estuary and wetlands provide stunning and unique ecological, recreational, and tourist opportunities for the City of Ventura. Allowing the estuary and wetlands to return to a closer semblance of their former size would provide increased opportunity for the City of Ventura to enhance the economic as well as ecological benefits derived from the estuary.

River channels, dense vegetation, safety concerns, and the needs of plants and wildlife that are sensitive to disturbance are all factors that currently limit visitor access to the estuary and surrounding wetlands. However, visitors currently enjoy stunning views of the estuary from a section of the Omer Rains Trail between the river mouth and the Main Street Bridge.

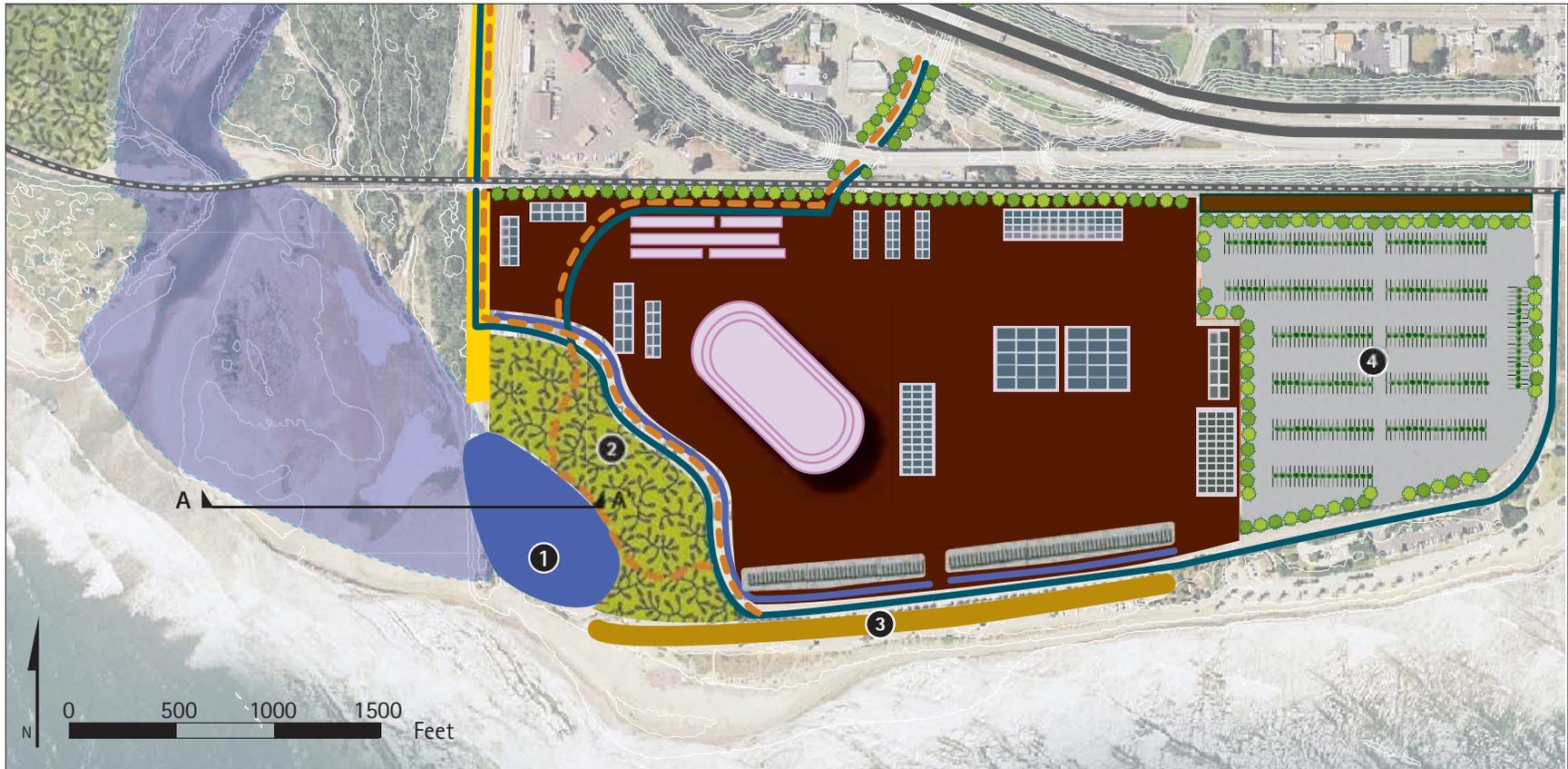
In addition, a railroad trestle across the estuary affords an attractive and potentially deadly temptation for walkers who often enter from the levee trail for a walk along the tracks. The close-up views of the estuary, wetlands and hidden river channels from the trestle are impressive, and the illegality of this crossing is not a complete deterrent to adventurers, some of whom have been killed on the trestle (Green 1998).



**[NEAR RIGHT] FIGURE 12.28** Views of the Ventura River Estuary. Top: the estuary is contained by an intermittent sandbar that is overtopped by tidal action and high river flows during wet periods. Middle and bottom: two sections of the railroad trestle that crosses the estuary.

**[FAR RIGHT] FIGURE 12.27** Top: illustration of the Ventura River Estuary adapted from a survey from the 1850's, including a second estuary east of the Ventura River (highlighted). Middle: a 1946 aerial photograph. Bottom: aerial photography from 2004. Sources: Museum of Ventura County, City of Ventura, CIRGIS.

### DESIGN CONCEPTS



- 1 Expanded estuary
- 2 Expanded wetlands
- 3 Dune
- 4 Parking lot

FIGURE 12.29 Proposed designs at Ventura County Fairgrounds.

This Vision Plan proposes removing an approximately 500 foot portion of the southern end of the Ventura River Levee, allowing the flow at the river's mouth to spread eastward, and returning a portion of the Fairgrounds site to estuary and wetland. Allowing the estuary to expand and return to an increased semblance of its original form could promote the return of many of the natural functions and species of the estuary and wetland environment. In addition, allowing these ecosystems to expand eastward could result in more robust ecological function in the currently existing estuary and wetland areas west of the levee, by creating increased groundwater recharge and additional distributary channels that would supply water to both the existing and expanded areas of the ecosystem.

Moving a portion of the Omer Rains Trail inland, so that it continues to follow the edge of the remaining Fairgrounds site, would protect the fragile wetlands and dune environment. However, a raised pedestrian boardwalk would connect the Fairgrounds and the Trail with the beach and Surfers Point while providing pedestrians with a close-up view of wildlife in the estuary and wetlands. Extensive feasibility studies would be necessary to determine the nature of the potential water supply to this section of the estuary, flood safety, the viability of the remaining Fairgrounds site, and the effects upon Surfers Point and the dune environment. The complexity of these factors is beyond the scope of this Plan, but the proposal

itself highlights an important principle: that the historical removal of California's coastal wetlands is not wholly irreversible and that in addition to preservation, restoration of wetlands is an important agenda item for the future. Determining the appropriate restoration boundaries at this site would be aided by the California Coastal Conservancy's *Ventura Historical Ecology Study* when completed. Once the boundaries of the estuary and wetlands have been established and agreed upon, site restoration would entail re-contouring the topography, intensive wetland planting and seeding, possible relocation of buildings and the bike trail, and a maintenance regime for the control of non-native species.

The rail trestle across the main existing estuary is an attractive nuisance, a feature that entices visitors but can cause serious injury or death. Future planners should explore configurations of the trestle that would allow visitors to cross, since that is what they want to do, while remaining safely separate from occasional passing trains. If feasible, this feature would enable visitors in the Fairground area to cross to the area of the Ventura River Interpretive Center (below) with spectacular views, while causing minimal disturbance to the estuary and wetland ecosystems. If this arrangement is not feasible, planners should take aggressive steps, through more emphatic signage or physical barriers, if necessary, to prevent visitors from entering the trestle.



**FIGURE 12.31** *The Ventura Levee currently constrains the estuary, limiting the extent of the benefits the estuary can provide.*

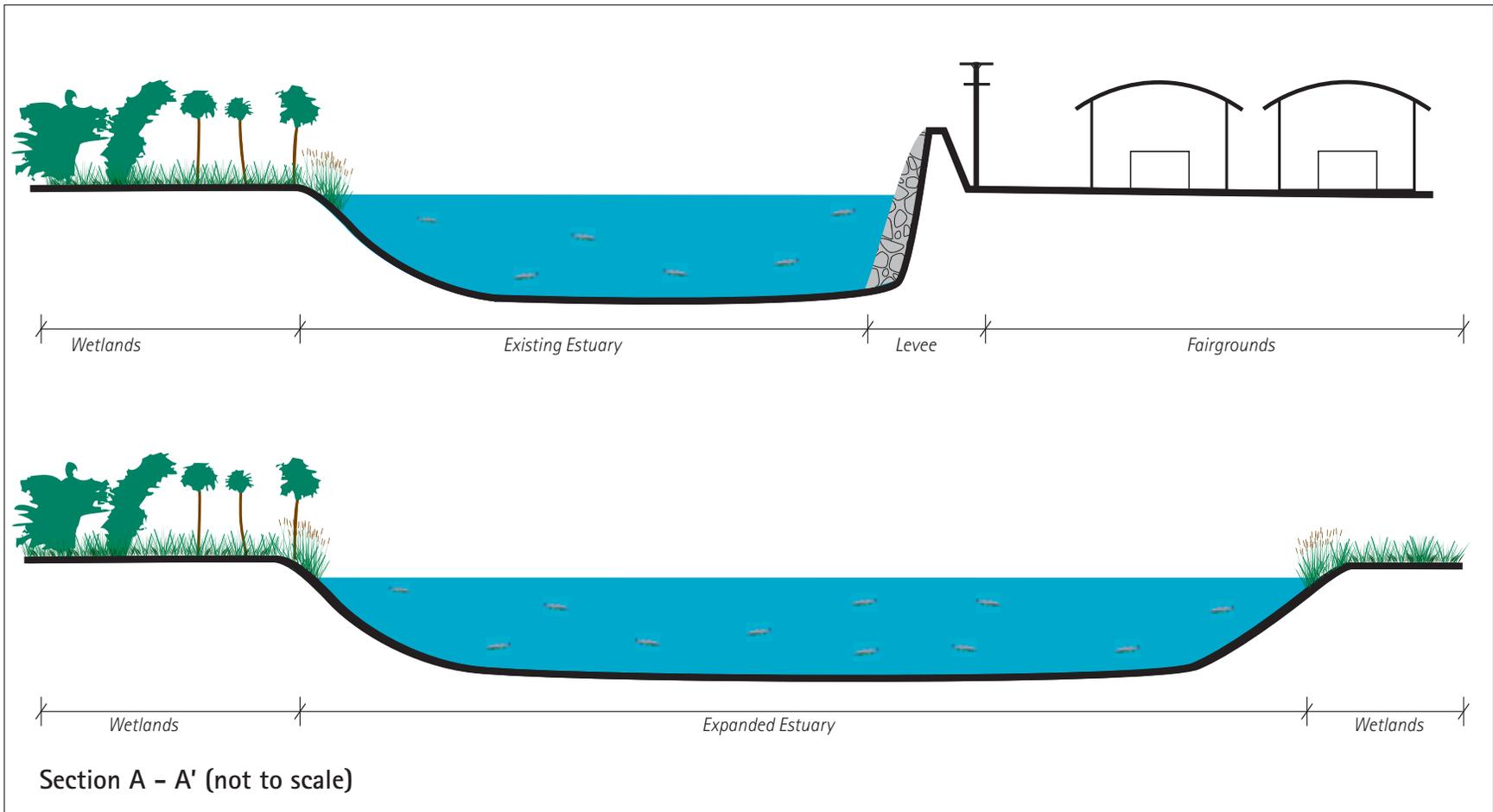


FIGURE 12.30 Section A - A' (see Proposed Design, Fig. 12.29) demonstrating the current and proposed extent of the Ventura River Estuary.

## EXISTING CONDITIONS

### Dune

In 1989, a bike path and parking lot were constructed on artificial fill adjacent to the beach at Surfer's Point. These facilities encroached upon a remnant dune formation (Jenkin, 2002). The construction of these facilities did not include adequate provisions for increased public beach access and this soon resulted in the destruction of the dune resource (Jenkins, 2002). In addition, the trail and parking lot were located too close to the active shoreline, and were therefore subject to flooding and erosion which continues to the present time.

## DESIGN CONCEPTS

This Vision Plan supports the already existing Surfers' Point Managed Shoreline Retreat (SPMSR) project. The SPMSR project seeks to address the both the loss of dune



FIGURE 12.33 Evidence of erosion along the bike trail at Surfer's Point.

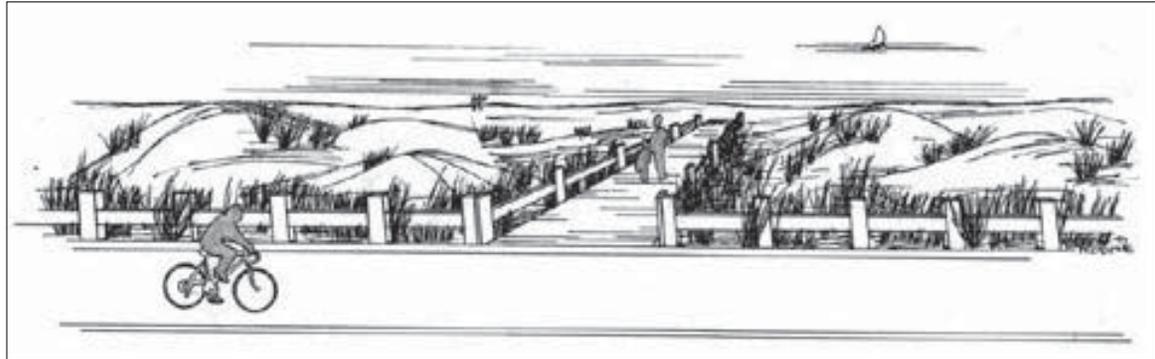


FIGURE 12.32 Proposed dune restoration as part of the Surfers' Point Managed Shoreline Retreat (SPMSR) project. Source: Surfrider Foundation.

habitat and current shoreline erosion that is occurring between Surfers' Point and the Fairgrounds. By replacing the existing bike trail and parking lot with sand and cobble and relocating these amenities sixty-five feet to the north, the SPMSR seeks to stabilize and restore 1,800 feet of beach that lies between Surfer's Point and the Ventura County Fairgrounds. At the time of writing, the SPMSR has been approved by the Ventura City Council, but is not yet completely funded (Ventura County Star, June 11, 2008).

Relocating the bike path and parking lot and restoring the area to a more natural beach habitat will aid in the long-term restoration of dune habitat. Since coastal dunes are a listed as "rare and threatened habitat" by State and Federal governments, and as "depleted" by the Marine Mammal Protection Act, this restoration effort will fulfill local and regional habitat improvement goals.

In addition to increasing ecosystem benefits, the trail and parking lot relocation as outlined in the SPMSR will also help preserve City resources that are currently being diverted

to combat beach erosion. In addition to the increased ecosystem benefits and the preservation of City resources, the SPMSR will also result in enhanced coastal protection, the protection of a valued surf spot, and increased tourism opportunities. Lastly, expanding dune habitat would also increase the potential for the reestablishment of the Ventura Marsh Milk Vetch, a severely endangered plant of which the only remaining known population exists on a tiny segment of dune habitat in Oxnard (U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service 2001).

The SPMSR is the result of extensive negotiation between all stakeholders, and this Vision Plan recognizes and applauds that effort. However, since this Vision Plan supports estuary and wetlands restoration on the Fairgrounds adjacent to the dune habitat, this plan sees the trail relocation planned by the SPMSR as temporary. Pending further study and negotiation, this Plan supports future negotiations for parking and trail relocation that takes into account the restoration of all three critical habitat areas.

## EXISTING CONDITIONS

### Parking Lot

A 2,000 space, asphalt parking lot is situated as part of the Ventura County Fairgrounds site, and serves both the Fairgrounds and the adjacent Amtrak station.

Asphalt parking lots are detrimental to the environment in multiple ways. Urban runoff from asphalt parking lots is a major component of nonpoint source pollution (U.S. EPA 1996). Runoff from parking lots introduces heavy metals, petroleum products, and suspended solids to the surrounding environment. (For more information on urban runoff, see Appendix B). Asphalt parking lots also raise temperatures and contribute to the Urban Heat Island Effect. By absorbing and radiating heat from the sun and reducing the amount of water available for evaporation, large expanses of dark colored asphalt raise local air temperature and increase the energy demand for cooling. Additionally, as vehicles parked in the direct sun heat up, they emit smog-forming contaminants and, once travel resumes, require additional energy to cool the vehicle.

The extensive parking lot at the Ventura County Fairgrounds site presents an opportunity to lessen the environmentally detrimental effects of the asphalt lot, while improving the appearance of the site. Low Impact Development (LID) techniques, which promote using natural vegetation and small-scale site treatments to reduce runoff and pollutants, can bring environmental benefits to this site. (For more information on Low Impact Development, see Appendix B).

## DESIGN CONCEPTS

This Vision Plan proposes redesigning the existing parking at the Ventura County Fairgrounds to employ LID techniques. The combined measures of permeable paving, runoff treatment swales, and vegetated shaded parking will all serve to reduce the negative environmental effects of the existing conditions, while improving the aesthetic appearance of the current parking lot.

Permeable pavers, an alternative to impervious asphalt, will provide multiple benefits to this site. Permeable pavers can be used to reduce the amount of runoff leaving the parking lot, facilitate pollutant removal, reduce thermal pollution to sensitive waters and the local atmosphere, and to improve the aesthetic appearance of the site (LID, 2008).

In order to reduce the risk of groundwater contamination, this Vision Plans recommends using an impermeable barrier and collection system below the pavers to transport the stormwater for additional on-site bio-remediation treatment. Though several studies have shown that permeable pavers limit pollutant migration to groundwater, with most pollutants retained either on the surface of the paver, on the geotextile layer, or in the upper sediments below the paver system, this Vision Plan recommends pro-active design which aggressively protects valuable groundwater resources.



FIGURE 12.34 Asphalt parking lot at Ventura County Fairgrounds.



FIGURE 12.35 Bird's-eye view of Estuary and Fairgrounds.



↘ position/direction of perspective

# Ventura River Parkway Interpretive Center



FIGURE 12.36 Proposed location of Ventura River Parkway Interpretive Center.

## EXISTING CONDITIONS

The Ventura Beach R.V. Resort and the Emma Wood Group Camp site straddle Highway 101 and form the western edge of the Ventura River Delta. While Emma Wood is a State Beach and the R.V. Resort is private property both sites provide popular recreation services. Although public recreation is a priority of this plan, these recreational uses present potential conflicts with the priorities of wetland restoration and floodplain management, since both properties lie almost entirely within the FEMA 100 year

floodplain and are located on former wetlands. However, in combination, these two sites still have the potential for meeting all three priorities.

## Ventura Beach R.V. Resort

Currently, the RV Resort provides the opportunity for extended stays with modern conveniences in an outdoor setting for the segment of the population who have access to recreational vehicles or RVs. It supports 144 paved RV sites each with hook-ups for electricity, water and sewer, a general store, two group meeting halls, a basketball court, swimming pool, horseshoes, and tot-lot (Ventura Beach RV Resort 2009). Because of a serious risk of flood damage recurring at less than twenty-year intervals, this campground is considered safe for occupancy only with an alarm system that warns occupants to evacuate in the event of floodwaters upstream (Keller and Capelli 1992). The risk of flood damage is particularly high on the eastern third of the site. Figure 12.44 illustrates that the Resort is situated on land in the path of an historic and active distributary channel of the Ventura River. The Resort saw only four years of use before it experienced \$1,000,000 in damage from a 1992 flood event. Additional evidence indicating that the Resort was inappropriately sited includes the span of the Main Street Bridge (built long before the Resort), which stretches well west of the Resort's eastern boundary. Before its construction



FIGURE 12.37 R.V. Resort camp sites located south of the Main Street Bridge.



FIGURE 12.38 Emma Wood Group Camp, day use area.



FIGURE 12.39 Second mouth and railroad trestle at Emma Wood State Beach.



FIGURE 12.40 Emma Wood State Beach with view to Seaside Wilderness Park.

in 1987-1988 the resort site was used for dry-farming through the 1950's, then lay fallow, with succession to a mixture of coastal sage scrub and riparian plants (Keller and Capelli 1992).

### Emma Wood Group Camp

The Emma Wood Group Camp also sustained considerable damage in the 1992 floods (Weil 2008). However, two differences prevented the Group Camp from sustaining the level of damage and attention of the R.V. Resort. First, while within the FEMA 100 year floodplain, the day-use and camping areas of the State Beach property are not located in the path of a distributary channel. Second, there were many fewer guests staying at the Group Camp than at the R.V. Resort during the 1992 floods, and, like the agricultural area to the north, the Group Camp has fewer structural improvements and lacks the amenities that encourage human habitation during wet seasons. However, it does have a number of publicly available amenities, including a day use area, an RV site and an en-route site without hookups, four group camp sites organized for tent use, a hike and bike camp site, and the trail head for Ocean's Edge Trail. Juan Bautista de Anza National Historic Trail (a 1,210-mile historic route from Nogales, Arizona to San Francisco, California) passes through the site, and a spur trail brings visitors east from the campground into the river. Developed in the early 1980's, the campground was designated as a group camp in order to meet a need for

sites that supported large groups (Weil 2008). In testament to that need the Group Camp receives approximately 8,000 guests annually, and is often at or near capacity during peak season from May through October (Weil 2008). Individual and family camping accommodations are available at the

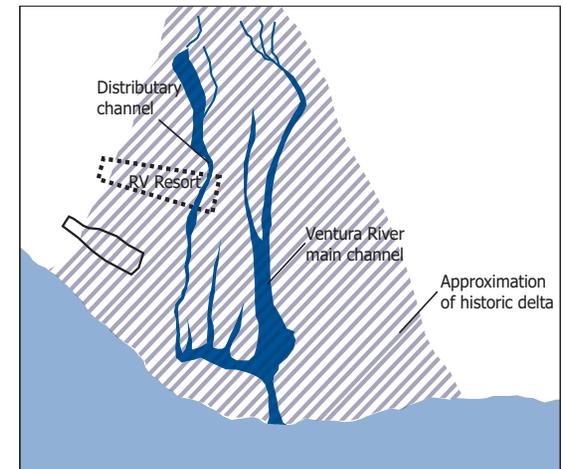


FIGURE 12.41 The outlines of Ventura Beach RV Resort and Emma Wood Group Camp are superimposed over a diagram of the main river and distributary channels taken from an 1855 survey. The distributary channel that runs through the RV Resort passed floodwaters through the site on at least four occasions during the past 40 years. Adapted from Keller and Capelli 1992, map based on US Coastal Survey 1855.



**FIGURE 12.42** Existing conditions at the Emma Woods State Beach and adjacent private RV camping area. Nearly all of the area shown lies in the FEMA 100-year floodplain, not highlighted here. Orthophotography: CIRGIS.

nearby Emma Wood North State Beach which provides R.V. camping, and by McGrath State Beach, which provides tent and R.V. camping.

A 1994 plan made numerous recommendations for restoring and enhancing Emma Woods State Beach, the Group Camp, and the adjoining Seaside Wilderness Park (Wetland Research Associates 1994). Recommendations for the Group Camp area that were implemented included the removal of invasive plant species, restoration of native plant species, and trail realignment. These actions most affected the spur trail leading to the river. Proposals that were not implemented included an interpretive center, a

viewing platform for the river’s second mouth, restoration of a twin-span railroad trestle to improve water flow to the second mouth, and restoration of the second mouth’s seasonal lagoon habitat. As of 2008, the California State Parks department had no current plans for the development of an interpretive center at Emma Wood State Beach (Weil 2008).

The spur trail is now once again overgrown with *Arundo donax*, and Park Wardens warn visitors not to travel on it alone. While statistics are not available, crime is a concern to the Parks Superintendent, and regular patrols of the Camp Ground and nearby river area are conducted by State

- ① Pedestrian Underpasses
- ② Estuary
- ③ Main Street Bridge
- ④ Railroad Trestle Bridge
- ⑤ Second Mouth (Seasonal Lagoon)
- ~ River channel (changing)
- Streets/Highways
- ⊞ Southern Pacific Railroad
- ▨ RV Park/Private Camping Area
- ▨ Emma Woods State Beach Group Camp Area
- ▨ Emma Woods State Beach Wetland Area
- ▨ Agriculture
- ▨ Ventura River Floodway

Park rangers (Weil 2008). The adjacency of the R.V. Park and the Group Camp sites to the beach, the estuary and second mouth of the Ventura River, Main Street Bridge, and Downtown Ventura all contribute to the popularity of these sites, making them a desirable location for recreational facilities. Addressing potential conflicts between natural processes and recreational opportunities at these sites will ultimately enrich the entire proposed parkway area.

- ① Camping/day use
- ② Interpretive Center
- ③ Restored wetlands
- ④ Railroad trestle
- Nature trail



FIGURE 12.43 Plan, Ventura River Parkway Interpretive Center.

## DESIGN CONCEPTS

Design concepts for these properties include the restoration of appropriate habitat on the eastern two thirds of the RV Resort, the introduction of an interpretive center built on the western third of the RV Resort, and, finally, improvements to the layout at the Emma Wood Group Camp. Objectives that guide these recommendations include floodplain compatibility, ecosystem preservation and restoration, increased access, and development of future stewards.

### Ventura River Interpretive Center

The first design recommendation is the restoration of the eastern portion of the RV Resort to wetland and/or coastal sage scrub, the exact plants and cover to be determined by further study. Removal of impermeable surfaces, electrical and sewage hook-ups, and re-grading of the area of the resort that is most flood prone will allow for increased habitat area for sensitive ecosystems, and increase floodplain compatible use. In addition, returning this land to a form closer to its original state will help reinforce the natural character of this landscape as wild and not habitable.

The introduction of a small interpretive center on the western portion of the R.V. Resort would further meet objectives for floodplain compatibility, access to the Ventura River and its environs, and to encourage the creation of future stewards through educational opportunities. As proposed, floodplain compatibility will be ensured by placing buildings well west of the distributary channel. An architectural approach that allows for wet conditions and passage of flood waters at the eastern extents of the building will further provide this compatibility. Replacement of the existing recreational opportunity of the RV Resort

with the proposed features will engender more flood compatible use by disallowing extended stays during high risk seasons. In addition, the proposed plan will create expanded access for a larger number of individuals. Ultimately the interpretive center will provide floodplain compatibility, ecosystem sensitivity, and greater visitor access to the Ventura River. Opportunities to educate the public not only about the flashy nature of the Ventura River, the importance of rivers and flood processes in general, and the valuable ecosystems in the vicinity will be provided by the facilities' programming as well as its unique location and construction.

### Emma Wood Group Camp

The existing trail that leads to Emma Wood Group Camp from the western edge of the proposed Interpretive Center provides the opportunity for these two properties to offer complementary recreational experiences for outdoor enthusiasts. Together, these sites present the potential to offer education, primitive accommodations, and connections to outlying outdoor recreation. Introduction of more native vegetation to the day use areas and group camps would increase habitat and provide learning opportunities, as well as provide more privacy for family tent camping. These improvements at Emma Wood Group Camp would allow the proposed Interpretive Center and the Group Camp to function as complementary pieces of a recreational whole. This would reflect the reality that the natural systems existing at the R.V. Resort, Emma Wood Group Camp, and the Ventura River function as a unit.

### Restoration of Lagoon Habitat

The proposals presented here anticipate, and are compatible with, other detailed recommendations in the Wetlands

Research Associates 1994 plan. Notable among those recommendations are the restoration of a fresh/brackish water seasonal lagoon habitat that existed as a self-sustaining system at the second mouth of the river prior to its impairment by railroad activities starting in the 1970's. Restoration would commence with reconstruction of the existing railroad trestle across the second mouth to restore a second bridge span that previously existed, thereby improving the supply of water and natural scouring action to the lagoon system (Wetlands Research Associates 1994).

In connection with reconstruction of the railroad trestle, planners should explore the feasibility of using the trestle as a support system for an elevated pedestrian trail that would provide visitors with views of the second mouth and surrounding wetlands, perhaps as an extension of the elevated pedestrian system discussed in connection with the estuary. While a system of this sort would involve engineering and safety considerations beyond the scope of this Plan, an elevated passage would eliminate the need for the spur trails to the north, minimizing intrusions on riparian and wetland habitat, and moving trail users above dense vegetation that provides opportunities for crime.

## CONCLUSION

The proposed Ventura River Interpretive Center would be within easy reach of other proposed features of this Plan - Cottonwood Junction, the Ventura Wilds Trail, and the Levee Trail - as well as the Ventura urban center and the numerous existing multi-use trails through the area. These adjacencies would enable the Interpretive Center and Emma Wood Group Camp to function as a home base for parkway use for Ventura residents as well as an introduction to the parkway for coastal travellers.



**FIGURE 12.44** Bird's-eye view of the existing estuary and wetlands with a reconfigured railroad trestle, and with expanded and restored wetlands, Emma Wood Group Camp and the Ventura River Visitors Interpretive Center in the background.