CHAPTER 8: CIRCULATION PLAN

Overview and Existing Conditions

Much of the visitor's experience of the six mile Lower Ventura River will consist in moving around the river corridor, walking, pedalling, or driving. This chapter addresses existing circulation conditions in the proposed parkway area and concepts for visitor circulation throughout the parkway. Succeeding chapters feature more detailed circulation ideas pertaining to individual sites.

HIGHWAYS, ROADS, AND BRIDGES

Highways 101 and 33 intersect at the southern end of the project area, the 101 running east and west, while Highway 33 runs north and south. Major streets are Ventura Boulevard (north-south orientation) and Main Street (east-west). Automobile traffic along the six-mile stretch from Foster Park to the mouth of the river is served by public and private roads. A typical street grid services the east side of the river. Passage over the river is provided by two public bridges. The Main Street Bridge in the south and Casitas Vista Bridge in the north both also provide narrow passage for pedestrians and cyclists and views of the river. Both bridges feature free public parking less than a block away. Shell Road Bridge, in the central portion of the project area, provides crossing for industrial traffic and is privately owned. The west bank of the river in the project area is rural in character, with only three public roads; Casitas Vista Road near Foster Park, and Main Street which merges into the third public passage, Highway 101. However some of the properties have extensive fire roads. This network of roads allows motorists ample opportunity to cross and circumvent the Ventura River, but there are only two lots in which motorists can park their cars and join the River Trail or rest in a park-like atmosphere. These circulation patterns suggest that the paved and developed roads did not evolve with the Ventura River as a destination intended for the public.

[OPPOSITE] FIGURE 8.1 *Clockwise from left: Shell Bridge; Ventura River Trail in the North Avenue area; railroad trestle over the Ventura River Estuary; agricultural service road, west bank of river.*

TRAILS

No walking trails currently exist in the Lower Ventura River floodway or along either bank of the river. There are two designated trails which serve cyclists and pedestrians in the proposed parkway corridor. The Ventura River Trail begins approximately six miles upstream from the coast at Foster Park (where it meets the southern end of the Ojai Valley Trail) and runs along the east side of the river for almost the entire length of the proposed parkway, ending several blocks from the coast. A number of locations from the street grid provide entrance points. The Ventura River Trail is for both pedestrians and cyclists, although many people believe that it is only for the latter. Omer Rains is a coastal bike and pedestrian trail with a short section that runs up the river from the estuary, on top of the levee, until it reaches the Main Street Bridge and turns west to continue along the coast. Despite their proximity, the two trails never actually meet.

Despite its name, users of the Ventura River Trail cannot walk or ride near the Ventura River or enjoy views of the river. Along most of the first four miles of the trail below Foster Park, physical and visual access from the trail to the river is blocked by private property restrictions, fences, and high, dense vegetation. Along the other two miles of the trail approaching the coast, the Ventura levee and Highway 33 form a hard, impenetrable edge that blocks physical and visual access. These constraints impact not only trail users but residents of the Westside community. Long stretches with little vegetation and fast moving traffic create a hot, physically uncomfortable and unsafe atmosphere along sections of the trail.

THE TRESTLE

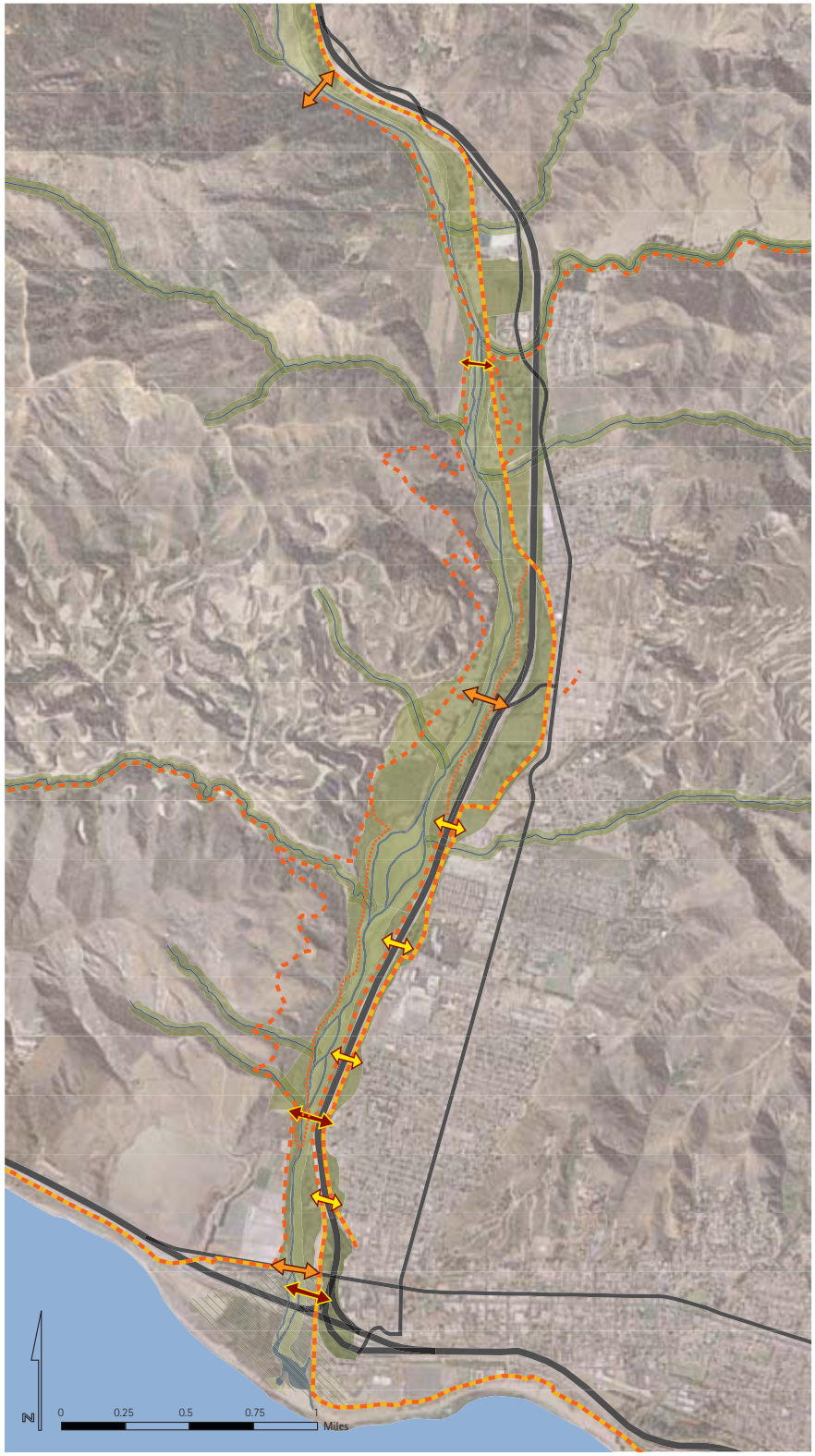
Railroad service cuts across the southern end of the proposed parkway near the beach. Where they cross the estuary at the river mouth, the tracks are supported by an iconic steel trestle that attracts both out-of-town visitors and Ventura residents. Pedestrians who cross here are treated to an impressive view of the river and estuary but risk severe injury, death, or prosecution. The trestle also impedes sediment flow and disrupts natural processes.

Design Concepts

CIRCULATION PLAN

Key ideas underlying the circulation element of this plan are:

- the opening up of the west bank and hillsides of the river through a variety pedestrian trails, improved or ephemeral, that emphasize a experience in nature
- the creation of opportunities on both banks of the river for walkers, and in some cases cyclists, to view the river more closely
- the combining of the trails with existing and proposed bridges to create loops that would provide flexibility in both distance and quality of experience (urban or wilds) for parkway visitors



Symbol	Element	Description
	Highways	Highway 101 and highway 33 — connections to outside the parkway
	Major Roads	Ventura Avenue — principal vehicular route within the parkway
	Multi-use Trails	•existing and proposed trails •universal access •segregated fast and slow lanes •permeable and impermeable paving •quick access to amenities and services
	Nature Trails	•provide access to river and undeveloped lands settings •limited amenities and services •unpaved •proposed trails
	Ephemeral Trails	•limited access •wild character
	All-access Bridges	•existing vehicular river crossing •currently has or is proposed to have bicycle and pedestrian lanes •connects urbanized areas to rural areas
	Limited-access Bridges	•proposed river crossing •non-motorized use •connects urban edge to undeveloped area
	Elevated Freeway Crossings	•proposed freeway crossing •originates in urban neighborhood from proposed pocket park •terminates on proposed Levee Trail •non-motorized use

[OPPOSITE AND ABOVE] FIGURE 8.2 *Circulation Plan.*

FIGURE 8.3 *Typical lane configuration.*

MULTI-USE TRAILS

Multi-use trails within the proposed parkway would provide elements which accommodate many types of users. Located primarily along the east side of the river adjacent to urbanized areas, the trails would provide multiple entry and exit points for easy access to the existing street grid with its restaurants, vehicle parking, and other urban attractions. In addition, they would pass through two existing parks and two proposed parks with rest rooms, picnic areas, and other visitor facilities. In addition, the trails would provide opportunities for trail users to stop at occasional river overlooks.

Most multi-use trails would follow the existing Ventura River Trail, but one, discussed and illustrated in Chapter 12, would be located on top of the Ventura levee. In some areas it would be necessary for multi-use trails to run in close proximity to Ventura Boulevard or Highway 33. Greening the edges of these thoroughfares would provide a more pleasant experience for trail users and motorists alike. Grading and pavement would be appropriate for wheelchair users and those in search of a relaxing stroll. There would be separate trails for slow- and fast-moving trail users. This would most often result in pedestrians on one path and cyclists or skaters on the other. Separating wheel traffic from foot traffic would allow each type of user to proceed at a comfortable pace without creating conflict.

NATURE TRAILS

Nature trails would run the length of the parkway on the west side of the Ventura River and would have permanent alignments, a clearly marked foot bed, appropriate signs for wayfinding purposes, and occasional interpretive displays for educational purposes. These trails would provide occasional views into the river itself, but they would be located outside the river floodway and designed to avoid undue impact on the high-value habitat through which they pass.

Development of these trails would require the permission and support of private property owners in some areas, and would require appropriate arrangements to avoid any impacts from recreational users on adjacent private land. Erosion control measures would be implemented where needed, but impermeable surfaces would not be put in place. Disruption of natural systems would be minimized during development, and alignments and signage would encourage visitors to keep to the trail.

Different trail segments would offer experiences of riverside, farms, orchards, and hills. Anticipating future permanent conservation of hillside areas above the river, several trails along tributaries would connect river walkers with potential trails on the hilltops. Nature trails would provide tomorrow's stewards a place to experience the natural world.

FIGURE 8.4 *Nature trails would include signage for wayfinding purposes and interpretive displays where appropriate.*

EPHEMERAL TRAILS

Ephemeral trails are one way to address the unique characteristics of the Lower Ventura River in a way that affords limited public access without excessive impact on sensitive riverbed ecosystems. Ephemeral trails are marked paths with temporary alignments. In the dry seasons, these would allow hikers to walk in the riverbed, climb over cobbles and boulders and touch the river's waters when conditions permit. These trails would feature no permanent improvements, and alignments would be changed periodically by parkway staff in order to minimize the impact of hikers.

Ephemeral trails are a useful concept along the Lower Ventura River because for most people the idea of a river means flowing water, and some visitors will attempt to approach the flowing river channels regardless of whether a safe, low-impact method exists for doing so. However, the flowing channels that run through the proposed parkway area are often deep within the undeveloped riverbed or floodway zone. This zone is rugged, densely vegetated in some places, hazardous for walkers unaware of loose boulders or snakes, and especially vulnerable to ecosystem damage from visitor traffic. Nature trails (previous page) can take walkers along the outside edge of the floodway where the flowing channels are usually not visible, but permanent trail alignments that would take visitors to the edge of a flowing channel will not be feasible in most parkway areas because the braided channels can change location, and because permanent infrastructure would unduly interfere with the sensitive ecosystems of the riverbed and would be subject to occasional damage or destruction from flood scouring.

FIGURE 8.5 *An ephemeral trail would be temporary and undeveloped but could include amenities such as movable trail markers and ramps to allow hikers to enter the riverbed without doing damage.*

Ephemeral trails would require virtually no development, but they would need programming, monitoring, and maintenance. Low-impact amenities might be located for the purpose of improving visitor safety as well as protecting the environment. For example, temporary pole markers could be placed to indicate a path that would avoid risky channel crossings or dense vegetation, or several movable aluminum ramps might be placed to minimize erosion, protect dense vegetation and avoid injuries at the especially vulnerable spot where hikers leave the riverbank and climb down into the riverbed. These riverbank entry points would also feature signage providing information about docent-led tours, warnings regarding the dangers of entering the riverbed and descriptions of riverine ecosystems. Regular monitoring must occur in order to ensure the integrity of river processes and habitat. Maintenance would be

conducted as indicated by monitoring, to address issues such as wear due to use and redirection of individuals away from sensitive habitats such as nesting areas.

The use of ephemeral trails in the parkway area would be extremely limited. The desired visitor experience might be provided by a trail of 200 yards or less; only one or two such trails might be maintained within the parkway, with locations changing according to conditions.

Ephemeral trails would be an ideal location for docent-led tours that would provide information about river processes and sensitive ecosystems, for example, the eddies, riffles, and pools needed for steelhead growth and passage, or the need for caution due to the presence of hazards such as stinging nettles and rattlesnakes. An important concept in ecosystem function, ephemerality could provide opportunities for visitors to learn about the unique qualities of the Lower Ventura River, including the realization that not all rivers are contained in one channel that is full of water all of the time. Experiences such as this could lead to a greater respect for the unique character of Southwestern rivers.

ALL-ACCESS BRIDGES

Three existing bridges that cross the Lower Ventura River – at Casitas Vista Road at Foster Park, at Shell Road near the center of the parkway corridor, and at Main Street near the river mouth – are well situated for crossings that would provide visitor access to the west side of the river. The bridge at Shell Road is currently closed to the public but an arrangement with the owner for public passage would be valuable when combined with trail easements on the west side of the river.

Only one of the bridges, at Main Street, has a dedicated lane for non-vehicular traffic. Expanding the bridges at Casitas Vista Road and Shell Road to better accommodate walkers and cyclists would improve circulation, but replacement or significant alteration are ruled out by the fact that both bridges are architecturally impressive. One solution that could be considered is a parallel bridge structure that would allow non-vehicular travellers to cross at the same location.

These crossings, combined with trails on both sides of the river, would form flexible loops that allow users the ability to choose the duration of their hike or cycling trip. In addition, they would provide access to many features in the western half of the parkway for visitors who prefer not to walk from their vehicles.

FIGURE 8.6 *The bridge at Shell Road.*

FIGURE 8.7 *Materials like rope and wood would suggest a more rustic sense of recreation for visitors crossing between urban Ventura and the Cottonwood Junction area.*

LIMITED-ACCESS BRIDGES

The parkway would feature one or more bridges for pedestrians only and this Plan identifies three potential locations for them. Each of these pedestrian bridges would be distinct from the others in its character and design. One, located between Casitas Vista and Shell Roads, would provide a crossing between the Cañada Confluence area (chapter 10) on the east bank and a trail through the avocado orchards on the west bank. The second (figure 8.7), located between Shell Road and Main Street, would provide a crossing between West Side Ventura and the Cottonwood Junction undeveloped area (chapter 11). Finally, a reconstructed railroad trestle at the river mouth would feature safe, dedicated pedestrian passage and impressive views of the estuary. In addition to accommodating the desire to cross the estuary (currently a hazardous attraction for many visitors), the reconstructed trestle with a wider span would allow improved hydrological function where the river enters the estuary (Wetlands Research Assoc. 1994).

It is natural to want to cross a river, and elevated crossings above the dense vegetation and rugged landscape of the Ventura River would be the most practical way for most visitors to closely observe the river channels and their associated ecosystems. The combination of all-access and limited-access bridges would provide six potential locations where teachers could plan field trips from local schools, where Ventura families and nearby workers could observe a truly wild place with just a lunch hour to spare.

ELEVATED FREEWAY CROSSINGS

Elevated freeway crossings would enable visitors to access the proposed Ventura levee trail (chapter 12) from four locations on the west side of Ventura. These connections would surmount the principal physical obstacle between the river and the community, Highway 33. Some users might stop and enjoy the views of the highway below, the river just to the west, and the Pacific Ocean and Los Padres Mountains beyond. The 15-foot-wide decks would provide room for other users to continue past to the levee trail unimpeded.

In addition to serving pedestrians, and to a limited extent cyclists, the overpasses would add interest to the highway itself by presenting drivers with a series of four graceful arcs that would invite them to exit the freeway and to further investigate the river. With programmed opportunities for locals to display artwork and participate in regular maintenance the bridges would celebrate the renewed connection between the Westside Community and the Ventura River.

The freeway crossings would originate from the Westpark Community Center (connecting the Omer Rains Trail with the Ventura River Trail) and three proposed pocket parks to be located on West Simpson Street, Vince Street, and Stanley Avenue. The frequency and distribution of the overpasses along the parkway corridor would serve two purposes. They would provide walkable access to the river for people in many neighborhoods and from schools located close to these locations. Second, they would provide ample prospect and refuge, an important consideration because local residents have revealed a perception of high crime at the river and levee. The overpasses would ensure that levee trail users do not feel isolated or trapped by the adjacent freeway and would relieve fear of victimization by providing exits which can be seen at all times and which are no more than one quarter mile away at any point on the path.

CONCLUSION

A combination of existing and proposed trails serving many kinds of non-vehicular movement, and connected by bridges and overpasses to form flexible loops would serve an important parkway objective by encouraging convenient movement throughout the parkway as well as increased physical and visual access to the Ventura River.

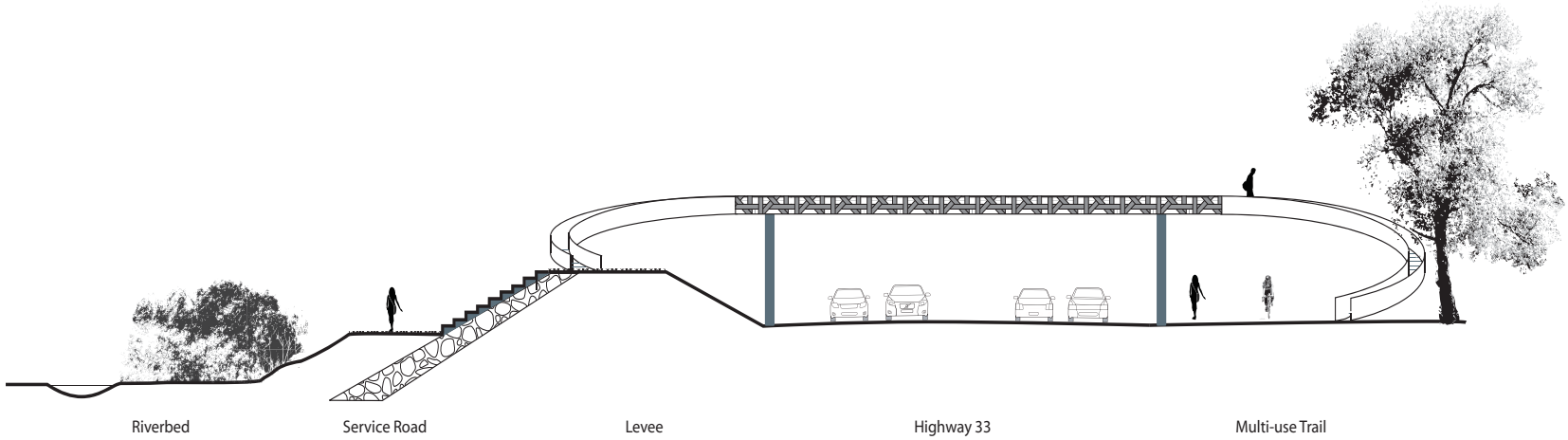


FIGURE 8.8 *Elevated freeway crossing.*

River parkways provide the recreational and ecosystem components of integrated regional water management and watershed plans.

California River Parkways Act of 2004
California Public Resources Code §5751(h)