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Re-envisioning the Guadalupe River Park

How San Jose can transform
its greatest natural resource
into a community gathering
place for all

www.spur.org/guadalupe

Acknowledgements

Authors:

Teresa Alvarado, Michelle Huttenhoff and Jaclyn Tidwell, SPUR
Alma Du Solier and Dana Floyd, Hood Design
Josh Abrams and Vu-Bang Nguyen, Baird + Driskell Community Planning

Project Partners:

City of San Jose Parks, Recreation and Neighborhood Services Department
Guadalupe River Park Conservancy
Santa Clara Valley Water District

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SPUR

654 Mission Street
San Francisco, CA 94105
tel. 415.781.8726
info@spur.org

76 South First Street
San Jose, CA 95113
tel. 408.638.0083
infosj@spur.org

1554 Broadway
Oakland, CA 94612
tel. 510.827.1900
infooakland@spur.org

Guadalupe River Park: Returning to the River

Communities across the country are rethinking their linear parks and trails to create community hubs and memorable places. From New York City’s High Line to Atlanta’s BeltLine, from Miami’s Underline to Chicago’s 606, downtown districts and neighborhoods are transforming underutilized infrastructure into engaging public spaces. Building on this national momentum, SPUR has turned its focus to the Guadalupe River Park, an underappreciated gem in downtown San Jose. We envision the Guadalupe River Park as a hub for community engagement, a catalyst for economic and cultural vitality, a flourishing natural habitat and an inclusive gathering place for residents, workers and visitors.

The Guadalupe River Park opened in 2005 and was, at the time, considered groundbreaking in flood protection infrastructure and public space design. It successfully controlled flood waters in a way that was both sensitive to the environment and inviting to the public, with trails for public access. San Jose’s largest urban park, it runs 2.6 linear miles along the west side of downtown San Jose.

Built between 1992 and 2005, the river park is home to many species of fish, birds and mammals, including salmon, herons and beavers. It is well-known for its chain of separate public parks through downtown — including Confluence Park, Discovery Meadow, McEnery Park and Arena Green — as well as for its public art reflecting the diverse character and history of San Jose and the river’s watershed. Many modes of transportation surround the park: Diridon Station, San Jose’s central passenger train depot, abuts the southern end of the park; the Mineta San Jose International Airport sits to the north, placing flight paths overhead; the park’s trail system serves as a high-traffic commute corridor for employees in downtown and North San Jose; and an elevated portion of Interstate 87 tops a segment of the river and trail network.

The Need for Change

After more than a decade, the river park has aged, making a number of challenges clear: maintenance is inconsistent; the region’s housing affordability crisis has created a large population of homeless residents who live along the river banks; there has been conflict over the quantity and quality of water for fish and other wildlife habitat; and a lack of amenities and basic design features, such as lighting, has left the park underutilized.

As a result, San Jose residents are likely to visit Guadalupe River Park far less than other city parks. Of nearly 1,000 residents surveyed in January 2018 (through a

partnership with the Center for Active Design), the majority reported that they are avid park-goers but not regular visitors of Guadalupe River Park; 29 percent of respondents had never visited the park. Respondents did not feel especially proud of the park in its current state. In fact, only 21 percent reported that they were currently very proud of the park, while 41 percent reported that they weren't proud of the park. However, while respondents did not exhibit a high degree of pride for the park in its current state, they most certainly recognized its potential: 61 percent viewed it as a great asset and 57 percent felt very invested in its future. This sentiment suggests recognition of the natural advantages the park offers, a great desire for change and regeneration and the confidence that such change is possible.



A cyclist passes through the downtown stretch of the Guadalupe River Trail. Photo by Sergio Ruiz.

Why Now — and Why It Matters

Plans to bring BART and high-speed rail to Diridon Station have spurred significant planning and development interest around the station and downtown. Now is the time for bold thinking and big investments in Guadalupe River Park and the surrounding community in order to capitalize on the anticipated growth, leverage state and philanthropic resources and direct investment toward the social, cultural and economic well-being of the community.

The public realm plays a critical role in bringing communities together to interact informally, build trust in government and existing institutions, participate in health and wellness activities and cultivate a sense of pride in and connection to their cities. San Jose, like most cities, is seeing a decline on these fronts, particularly in civic trust and connection to community.¹

¹Center for Active Design, Snapshots of Assembly in Action, Spring 2018, <https://centerforactivedesign.org/assembly-in-action-spring-2018>

New ways of seeing natural resources, new ideas for urban park activation and new approaches to collaboration are shedding new light on the tremendous opportunities for the Guadalupe River Park to evolve and improve once more.

California's recently approved Proposition 68 provides an ideal opportunity for San Jose to leverage state dollars to revitalize the Guadalupe River Park. The proposition provides for a \$4 billion general obligation bond for state and local parks, environmental protection and restoration, water infrastructure and flood protection. It specifically earmarks \$3 million for projects supporting the preservation of the Upper Guadalupe River Watershed.

As Google's plans for an employment and residential village next to Diridon Station progress, new development will begin to flank the Guadalupe River Park. New service connections at Diridon Station will link San Jose to the Bay Area and the statewide transportation network, providing new mobility options and introducing riders and visitors to the park in a fresh way. The river is the natural connection between many of downtown San Jose's most significant destinations, and the park will play an increasingly vital role in the upcoming changes to the South Bay's urban center.

For all these reasons, SPUR is leading an initiative to develop a cohesive and integrated vision for the park's next phase. Through this effort, and in collaboration with project partners, we will assess and recommend how the river and park might best be used and how they might be enhanced by public and private investments for the good of the river ecosystem and community.

SPUR's Role and Project Partners

SPUR is committed to engaging with those who love the Guadalupe River Park and have spent decades working to improve this as-of-yet unrealized asset in the heart of the city. SPUR has a long track record of convening stakeholders to plan and design the urban landscape. For example, we led an extensive interagency and public process to develop the Ocean Beach Master Plan,² a comprehensive vision to address sea level rise, protect infrastructure, restore coastal ecosystems and improve public access on San Francisco's Pacific shoreline. As with the Ocean Beach Master Plan and other initiatives, SPUR is acting as a convener for this project; we are not an operating entity and do not intend to be the long-term governing entity overseeing the Guadalupe River Park. Instead our role is to bring together those who are responsible for governance and oversight — the Guadalupe River Park Conservancy, the City of San Jose Parks, Recreation and Neighborhood Services Department, the Santa Clara Valley Water District and others — to consider fresh opportunities for enhancements and long-term sustainability.

² SPUR, Ocean Beach Master Plan, May 2012, <https://www.spur.org/publications/spur-report/2012-05-21/ocean-beach-master-plan>



The first phase of the project had two parts: First, we hosted a series of public forums featuring leaders from Denver, New York, Los Angeles and Washington, D.C., who shared lessons learned from successful parks and infrastructure projects.³ Second we engaged Hood Design Studio to facilitate a series of community workshops and initial research analysis. The information gathered — both technical and aspirational — laid the foundation for this paper and for the next stage of planning activities. Based on that early work, this paper presents a set of ideas, concepts and community aspirations that require further research and consideration.

This work draws heavily on a previous SPUR report, *The Future of Downtown San Jose*,⁴ which outlines three significant opportunities that will only raise the profile of the Guadalupe River Park in the years to come:

1. The fabric of downtown and the surrounding neighborhoods makes it the most urban place in the South Bay, with more than 300 restaurants, bars and entertainment venues and 8,000 new residents added between 2000 and 2010.
2. With planned investments, downtown will become one of the most transit-connected locations in the entire state. Services will include local bus and light rail throughout Santa Clara County; trains to the East Bay, Central Valley and Sacramento; BART connections to Oakland and San Francisco; and high-speed rail to Los Angeles and San Diego.
3. Downtown has numerous core anchor institutions and hundreds of successful events that increasingly fill its streets with life, including San Jose State University, the Convention Center, four theaters, the SAP Center (home of the San Jose Sharks hockey team), 38 cultural and civic institutions, and major downtown festivals and events.

Next steps will include the release of several reports focused on ways to ensure Guadalupe River Park is both environmentally and operationally sustainable. Some of these reports will focus on the following research opportunities:

- Governance, Financing and Operations
- Health/Social Welfare
- Economic Impact
- Water augmentation and flow

³ For summary reports of these conversations, see <https://www.spur.org/guadalupe>

⁴ SPUR, *The Future of Downtown San Jose*, March 2014, <https://www.spur.org/publications/spur-report/2014-03-17/future-downtown-san-jose>

How We Got Here: Río de Nuestra Señora de Guadalupe

The Guadalupe River originates from ephemeral streams that begin in the Santa Cruz Mountains on the southwestern end of the Santa Clara Valley and flow northward to the San Francisco Bay. Guadalupe Creek becomes Guadalupe River at its confluence with Alamos Creek in the Almaden Valley. Los Gatos Creek joins the Guadalupe River at West Santa Clara Street in downtown San Jose. From downtown, the Guadalupe grows in strength and flows north toward Alviso, where it then enters San Francisco Bay.

The Guadalupe River has been an important resource to the area since prehistoric times. Archaeologists have uncovered remains and discovered hunting camps and villages along the river's banks that date back over 2,000 years. The river has been home to native villages of the Coastanoan-Ohlone tribes of the Monterey and San Francisco Bays and has been the site of ancient battle fields and ancestral burial grounds.

In 1776, the Juan Bautista de Anza Expedition named the river Río de Nuestra Señora de Guadalupe to honor the patron saint of the expedition, the Virgin of Guadalupe. Soon thereafter, San Jose was founded as the state's first civilian settlement.



Looking south from the Lick paper mill in 1905, when trees and bushes surrounded the Guadalupe River. Image courtesy Clyde Arbuckle Photograph Collection, San Jose Public Library California Room.

In the 1800s, life along the Guadalupe River focused on the cultivation of cash crops such as wheat and flour-producing mills. With the Gold Rush of 1849, statehood in 1850 and a surging population in California, the demand for fresh (and later preserved) fruit and vegetables led to orchards lining the Guadalupe River. The economic transition from wheat to fruit and vegetable crops also led to development of the land along the river

for drying, canning, packing, processing and shipping produce. By 1900, the area along the Guadalupe River between Julian Street and Ryland Avenue was primarily an industrial complex of warehouses, manufacturing firms and canneries. The Guadalupe River was also home to two separate Chinatowns, including the Woolen Mills Chinatown.⁵

Taming the River

As a significant waterway, the Guadalupe River has provided San Jose with wealth and prosperity — but also with recurring floods. The most severe floods of the Guadalupe River occurred in 1862, 1895, 1911, 1955, 1958, 1963, 1969, 1982, 1986, 1995 and 1997. During the flood in March of 1995, the highest and most severe in 50 years, the combined flows of the Guadalupe River and Los Gatos Creek led to flooded homes and office buildings. Although federal studies on flooding along the Guadalupe River date back to 1941 and a flood protection project was authorized in 1986, project construction did not start until 1992, and completion was delayed until December 2004 after aspects of the project were redesigned to ensure protection of fish habitat in the river.⁶



People gather outside Notre Dame College, now the site of the De Anza Hotel, during the flood of 1890. Image courtesy Clyde Arbuckle Photograph Collection, San Jose Public Library California Room.

⁵ Life Along the Guadalupe River: an Archaeological and Historical Journey, Rebecca Allen and Mark Hylkema, Friends of Guadalupe River Park and Gardens, 2002.

⁶ Flood Control, Guadalupe River Park Conservancy, 2019. <https://www.grpg.org/flood-control/>



Floodwaters spill onto Highway 87 in downtown San Jose during the flood of 1995. Image courtesy Santa Clara Valley Water District.

The River Park was designed using flood protection systems developed by the Army Corp of Engineers and implemented using the City of San Jose's 1995 Guadalupe River Park Master Plan. In addition to the flood protection system, the park includes design elements that visitors enjoy today, including access points to the river, bridges to see the water, overlook plazas, native habitat for wildlife, public art, tennis courts, playgrounds and open space including Arena Green, Discovery Meadow and Confluence Park. The \$251 million project was funded by the U.S. government through the Energy and Water Development Appropriations Act and built by the Corps of Engineers and the Santa Clara Valley Water District.⁷

Through a series of land ownership and lease arrangements, the City of San Jose and the Santa Clara Valley Water District own much of the property adjacent to the river, while the water district retains ownership of all the flood protection facilities, as well as easements on city-owned park land. Portions of the property alongside the river are in private ownership but held for parks use through land leases subject to the same public land conditions assumed for the rest of the publicly owned park. Finally, the State of California holds a large portion of adjacent land due to its jurisdiction over State Route 87. The Guadalupe River Park Conservancy is the city's nonprofit partner in the development and active use of the Guadalupe River Park and Gardens. The conservancy serves as the operations and management body for projects within the park and gardens with a mission to provide community leadership through education, advocacy and stewardship.

⁷ "Flood Control", Guadalupe River Park Conservancy, 2019. <https://www.grpg.org/flood-control/>

Over the years, the Guadalupe River Park has undergone numerous planning and construction processes. Between 1992 and 2005, a total of \$350 million (2005 dollars) was spent on the construction of the park, including flood protection (\$251 million) and park improvements (\$99 million). Starting with the Guadalupe Gardens Master Plan in 1994, the river park has been the subject of various design guidelines, master plans, strategies and visions. (For a complete list, see Appendix on page 24.)

The northwest portion of the park, known as Guadalupe Gardens, sits directly in the flightpath of the Mineta San Jose International Airport. Due to noise and safety concerns, 630 homes were removed from this area starting in 1975. San Jose Mayor Tom McEnery proposed creating an open space and recreation area in 1986, and in 1990 a citizen task force formed to manage a master planning process. The master plan put forth three goals: flood protection, river restoration and recreational programming. The 1995 City of San Jose Guadalupe River Park Master Plan built on the flood protection system developed by the Army Corps of Engineers and refined it to include a series of concrete channels, rip-rap channels, vertical concrete walls and river banks with berms that protect downtown San Jose from flooding. The subsequent Guadalupe Gardens Master Plan, finalized in 2002, envisioned a community space meant for recreation and an appreciation of the natural environment, showcasing San Jose's heritage as a "garden city."

The park was also designed to directly intersect with the city's roadways, including Interstates 280 and 880, as well as about half a dozen streets. Each street and freeway crossing creates unique conditions when intersecting the park: Park segments dip below a concrete freeway overpass, flow over tunnels, lay atop large culverts, cross under bridges and abut railroad trestles.

The City of San Jose also approved the Guadalupe River Park Design Guidelines in 2003 as part of the planning efforts to support the park's completion. The guidelines aim to promote the ecology of the river, expand the river by creating new open spaces and extend the downtown area across the river. Lastly, the guidelines require parking lots to be oriented away from the river walk to avoid disruption to pedestrians.

The guidelines set maximum building heights for the area, ranging from 120 feet for portions of the park nearest to the airport to 280 feet for developments furthest from it. (Heights restrictions will likely rise soon: In March 2019, the San Jose City Council approved a change to airport flight paths that would allow taller buildings downtown and around Diridon Station.) Santa Clara County also limits the number of people congregating in parts of the park that lay within the airport's safety zones. The maximum population density in these areas range from 120 to 300 people per acre.⁸

⁸ Santa Clara County, Comprehensive Land Use Plan, Norman Y. Mineta San Jose International Airport, November 2016. https://www.sccgov.org/sites/dpd/DocsForms/Documents/ALUC_SJC_CLUP.pdf

Understanding Guadalupe River Park Today

Today, spaces along the Guadalupe River Park provide venues for environmental education classes and community events, such as the annual Turkey Trot race, the Women’s March and Fourth of July fireworks. The Guadalupe River Park Conservancy hosts several hallmark events in Guadalupe River Park each year, from the Annual Water Festival to Pumpkins in the Park. Each of these events aims to spur traffic and activity throughout the river park and shows glimmers of the park’s full potential.

The many previous master plans and studies of the river (see Appendix on page 24) will inform the next phase of this project. To understand better where we are today, SPUR hired Hood Design to facilitate an engagement process that brought together key partners to obtain relevant data on the river and park, identify key issues for future research and analysis, and gather community feedback about concerns and aspirations. The information generated from two initial workshops led to the development of thematic priorities that SPUR will further study to better understand the opportunities and barriers to future design of the river park.

The workshops focused on the 2.6-mile stretch of the river between Interstate 880 to the north and Interstate 280 to the south. Working with the participants and Hood Design, we outlined a framework for re-evaluating the park, which started with describing its existing conditions and led to imagining the possibilities for its future. This chapter focuses on the existing conditions. In Chapter 3, we will discuss how we gathered stakeholder input to formulate thematic priorities and community aspirations, which will eventually lead to recommendations on how to implement the community’s ideas.

The existing conditions described below are by no means an exhaustive list. They are, however, the beginning to our process of understanding and suggesting future possibilities for the river park. The existing conditions fall into two categories: core elements (the park’s functions and needs) and spatial zones (areas or “rooms” along the river and their uses).

The Park's Core Elements

The six core elements of the park include challenges that the park currently faces, such as existing flood protection requirements, ongoing aquatic habitat maintenance, connectivity issues between people and the river, fragmented ownership of surrounding land, city investment and maintenance deficiencies, and current homeless encampments along the river park.



1. Hydrology: flood protection, water quality and safety

As it flows through downtown, the Guadalupe River is primarily a flood protection channel that sits at the heart of the urban park, giving the space both its name and its primary design element: a depressed channel. The channel is designed to provide flood protection, maintain water quality and assure safety during large rain events. Levels of water in the river vary drastically from season to season as winter rains fill the channel and summer heat dries them up. Managed by the Santa Clara Valley Water District, the system provides three diversion channels and culverts, which are designed to safely overflow during large events such as a 100-year flood. On the northern reaches of the park, where sufficient land existed to widen the river naturally, flood protection is managed through natural river terracing, flooding meadows, detention areas, natural riparian vegetated river banks.

The design also seeks to maintain aquatic habitat and provides year-round minimum waterflow for fish migration. In its downtown stretch, the hydrology of the Guadalupe River is a functional system that has been designed to avoid flooding with a combination of hard structures and soft (green) infrastructure. Any future improvements to the river will need to retain the same level of flood protection quality that currently exists, defined by the Federal Emergency

Management Agency as a flood that has a 1 percent chance of being equaled or exceeded during any given year.

2. Ecology: habitat and wildlife

The Guadalupe River Park was designed to provide natural restoration to the river banks where possible. In pairing this goal with that of flood protection and overlaying it with the overhead transportation infrastructure, the resulting riverine landscape consists of distinct alternating zones of densely vegetated areas with highly constructed tunnel-like areas almost devoid of vegetation near the low-flow channel. The river is home to many wildlife species, including the Chinook Salmon, Rainbow Trout, Great Blue Heron and California Beaver. The Guadalupe River Park habitat is currently best described as a system of patches of natural river restoration areas combined with man-made flood protection structures that provide limited habitat and ecological benefits.

3. Connectivity and access: pedestrian, bicycle and water access

The Guadalupe River Park relies on formal and informal access points as well as a network of trails to provide connectivity to its many sections. The trails primarily connect through north-south routes. The park also interfaces with downtown and other neighborhoods through east-west connections. Routes are not only multi-directional, they can be accessed both at street level and through a trail system built into the depressed channel and accessible through ramps and steps. This results in a highly complex, nonintuitive network. A visitor taking a bike ride or walk from downtown would find connectivity and access challenging; they might struggle to find an entry point to the river and subsequently try navigating the street crossings and ramps, only to discover several dead-end trails. For those relying on public transit, only one light rail stop (at the Children’s Museum) serves the park directly.

4. Land use: existing land uses and potential redevelopment

The Guadalupe River Park boasts anchor institutions such as the Children’s Discovery Museum and SAP Center. San Jose’s central train hub — Diridon Station — is a five-minute walk from the park. One of the motivations for this project is to allow the park to benefit from opportunities presented by the planned redevelopment of parcels near its boundaries. Much of the land adjacent to the park is planned for office mixed-use or residential mixed-use development, including a number of potential projects between Diridon Station and the park. Google plans to build a new campus less than two blocks from the park, and Adobe Systems is expanding its nearby campus. As a result, many more employees and residents will be coming to downtown San Jose in the next decade.

5. Program: activation, permanent programs and public art

The original construction of the park included public art installations on street-level open spaces near Arena Green, Little Italy and Discovery Meadow to engage visitors with ecological and historical education. The park also includes tennis courts, a carousel, playgrounds and picnic areas. The Guadalupe River Park Conservancy takes primary responsibility for programming park education and activation events.

6. Stewardship: governance, operations and homelessness

The Guadalupe River Park Conservancy and San Jose's Parks, Recreation and Neighborhood Services Department share responsibility for the ongoing operations of the park space. However, given the River Park's central goal of providing flood protection, the riverbed is the responsibility of the Santa Clara Valley Water District. The water district maintains the riverbed and banks when a large storm leaves debris and/or damage, and it regulates the amount of water that is released into the river to maintain water levels year-round. Historically, three city field rangers were fully dedicated to maintaining the space. However, due to limited resources, the park now shares field rangers with several parks, staffed through the City of San Jose, and has no dedicated park rangers.

The Conservancy staff provides maintenance in designated areas of the park and holds volunteer days to support these efforts. However, the current maintenance and operations capacity has not kept pace with the need. Under these agreements, Guadalupe River Park Conservancy maintains the Rotary Play Garden and Guadalupe Gardens (rose garden and orchard) while the City of San Jose operates and maintains the rest of the park.

The banks of the river also provide shelter for the growing population of individuals and families without a home in San Jose. Due to the river's low flow most of the year, its proximity to San Jose's downtown urban core, certain areas that are heavily forested and inaccessible and a general lack of pedestrian activity, the park is an attractive place for many to camp or spend daytime hours. These camps make trails inaccessible and inviting to other park visitors, as well as creating additional maintenance and water quality challenges.

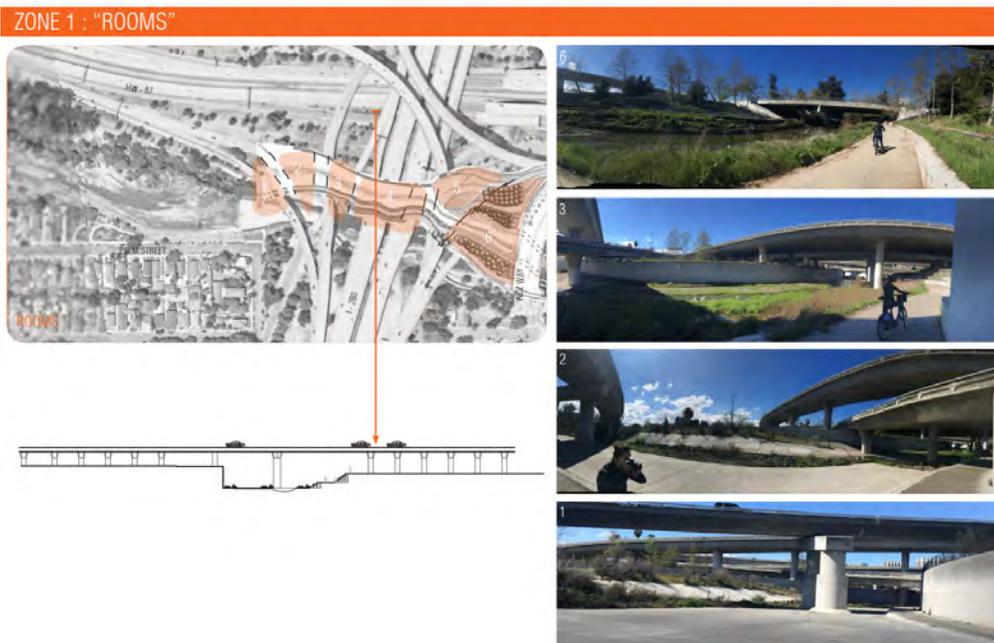
Spatial Zones in the Park

In addition to the six core elements of the park, it is important to understand its different spatial geographies. Because of its unique design as both a park and infrastructure project, the park is one public space with many zones or “rooms.” The zones identified below reflect the current conditions and uses along the river.



Zone 1

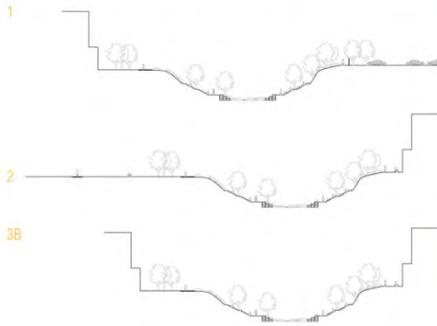
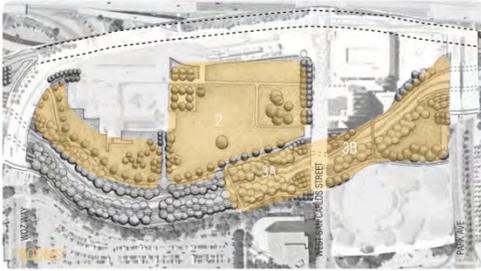
Beginning in the southernmost portion of the park’s urban segment, Zone 1 lies under the Interstate 280 interchange. It is characterized by a tangle of concrete trails and overpasses.



Zone 2

Housing the Children's Discovery Museum on its west side and the Center for the Performing Arts on its east side, Zone 2 boasts public art and two pedestrian bridges crossing the river.

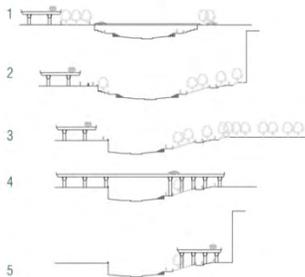
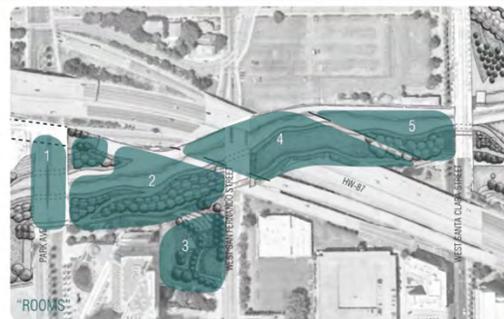
ZONE 2 : "ROOMS"



Zone 3

Between Park Avenue and West Santa Clara Street, Zone 3 offers a multi-grade experience for park users with the street level McEnery Park Playground, tiered concrete seating down to the river's edge and several trails under road crossings that form a concrete "roof" for these portions of the zone.

ZONE 3: "ROOMS"



Zone 4

Anchored by the SAP Center on the west side and Little Italy on the east, Zone 4 benefits from more pedestrian users and is characterized by street level open spaces, public art and historic architecture.

ZONE 4 : "ROOMS"



Zone 5

Trails running parallel to Autumn Parkway and near the river connect Zone 5 to the rest of the park. It has little programming and is the narrowest portion of the park.

ZONE 5 : "ROOMS"



Zone 6

In contrast to Zone 5, the final room — Zone 6 - is the widest portion of the park. It also serves as the park’s most natural segment. After passing through trails and crossing Coleman Avenue, users will find a set of trails and street-level open spaces as well as the Rotary Play Garden.



Imagining the Future: The Community Vision for Guadalupe

Thematic Priorities

In April 2018, our two-day work session led by Hood Design Studio convened key stakeholders who shared a deep interest in the park to kick off a process to re-envision it as a central green space in San Jose’s urbanizing core. Public officials, city staff, park advocates, business community members and San Jose residents came together to talk about how the park could serve as a gathering place, help connect downtown to the surrounding neighborhoods, improve the natural resource system and reinforce the city’s sense of place. Participants included design and technical experts with relevant knowledge and experience related to the Guadalupe River.

Those who attended the workshops saw extraordinary potential in the Guadalupe River Park to re-invent itself yet again. We have listed their ideas using the structure of the core element categories. This time, the elements appear in the order that participants ranked their priority. While not all of the ideas the group came up with are compatible with one another, all are included to represent the breadth of the community’s ambitions and vision for the space.

- 1. Stewardship and maintenance: governance, operations and homelessness**
 - Bridge the gap between homeless, tech and neighborhood to ensure success
 - Ensure the river park is completely sustainable environmentally, socially and economically
 - Maintain the park’s value by ensuring stewardship is key
 - Ensure the river park is embraced by all
 - Treat people who live in the park as constituents, not a group to get rid of

- 2. Land use: existing land uses, ownership and jurisdictions and potential redevelopment**
 - Ensure the park serves the whole city, not just a neighborhood
 - Develop better land use around the park to improve park activation
 - Require future park-adjacent development to “face” the park — physically, socially and emotionally
 - Maximize the park’s catalyst value by transforming it into a regional destination
 - Ensure new development of the park and surrounding properties considers and prevents gentrifying effects

- 3. Connectivity and access: pedestrian, bicycle and water access**
 - Ensure access to the park for all communities

- Maintain trails so they are smooth and continuous throughout
- Reveal the emotional connections to the park as much as the physical ones
- Increase access to the river throughout the park to make water more visible

4. Ecology: habitat and wildlife

- Ensure ecology is the foundation and driver of the park
- Maintain the spirit of the park to create a system that “flows” – a river that gives and receives
- Develop core activities related to restoration and habitat to engage the community
- Ensure ecological goals are planned for the very long term — seven generations out
- Develop a funding stream specifically for restoration and habitat

5. Hydrology: flood protection, water quality and safety

- Maintain levels of flood protection and anticipate climate change
- Honor the historical condition, quality and function of the river
- Ensure the river has water in it
- Design a more beautiful river

6. Program: activation, permanent programs and public art

- Design programs for all people
- Design programs to be both permanent and temporary
- Measure the park’s success by tracking success of park programs

The prioritization of stewardship and maintenance aligns with results from the survey conducted in January 2018. When asked to rank their top two priorities for the future of the park, far and away survey respondents said to find permanent supportive housing for the homeless population (44 percent). Next people wanted to see the area’s natural assets improved and mentioned using the efforts and investment to advance environmental restoration and education (19 percent), highlight the area’s natural beauty (18 percent) and provide a quiet escape from downtown (17 percent).

Imagining Possibilities for a Western River

In working groups and one-on-one conversations, the workshop participants reflected on the topic of the river’s perception and identity. What should a river look like? How can the community engage with the riverfront? Is it a valuable asset or a hinderance? Only through active engagement can the river and park truly become a core part of urban life in San Jose.

The Guadalupe River sits on a Mediterranean Chaparral landscape, which means water flow varies throughout the year; most of the time, the flow is reduced to only a trickle. Over the course of the working sessions, a perceived dichotomy emerged between the idea of a natural river and an urban river (i.e. restoration vs. recreation), as if these were mutually exclusive. Workshop participants on the restoration side of the debate

understood the river function and wanted the river to retain a natural sensibility; some pressed for allowing larger flows during fish migration, as would naturally happen if the river was not dammed upstream and flow was not controlled.⁹ People on the activation side saw the focus on restoration as yielding an unkept-looking park that had facilitated the proliferation of homeless encampments and other results not conducive to recreation.

Framing it as an either/or situation, workshop participants perceived that the dichotomy had led to a compromise resulting in the current state of the park. Recognizing this conundrum, they began talking about changing public perceptions as a way to embrace and celebrate the “real” river with all of its potential. If the many parts of the San Jose community could engage in a diversity of activities that did not diminish the natural ecosystem, park advocates could potentially find new synergies between recreational, restoration and maintenance activities and unleash currently untapped resources to support a multitude of goals.

What emerged was a realization that people want to do things in the park, and it is through this active engagement that the river can truly become a participant in urban life. Instead of focusing on how to change the river in order to encourage more activity, community aspirations could re-define how the river park is perceived and help build its identity. Park users could rethink how they look at the river park and how to make it more San Jose, more the community’s own river.

⁹ According to the water district, upstream reservoirs allow longer windows of time for downstream fish passage, meaning there is further need to discuss how water flow affects the river’s wildlife.

A “Yes and” Approach to Next Steps

In order to encourage community engagement, SPUR did not present any design ideas for the river park during the initial phase of work. Instead, our intention and focus was on engaging partners and stakeholders to take a fresh and holistic look at the river and park and recognize that environmental protection can coexist with big ideas about activation and public use. In the next phase of work, we’d like to further explore this “yes and” opportunity and challenge our community to collaborate on a project that is deeply rooted in the natural history of the region yet forward-looking and embracing of the change the city is undergoing.

Based on the community’s aspirations and the lessons from projects in other cities, we identified key takeaways to guide the next stage of research, planning and implementation:

- Reimagine the park as a place of many rooms with one cohesive vision and identity.
- Collaborate closely with partner organizations and key stakeholders to ensure a shared vision and joint commitment to action.
- Develop the river’s design, aesthetics and maintenance to be consistent with a seasonal, intermittent river and true Mediterranean landscape.
- Design a sustainable governance and funding model for the long-term (investment and improvements, ongoing maintenance, programing, etc.).
- Integrate social equity into the project planning for all aspects of park revitalization.
- Ensure community engagement and connection to the river elevates quality of life but does not gentrify existing neighborhoods.
- Advance strategies that engage and support the homeless population.
- Align park-building with ongoing city-building efforts and plan in coordination with other major development.
- Recognize that the park has many constituencies. It can grow to become a park for the city, for the adjacent neighborhoods, for the workers of the area and for visitors from throughout the community.
- Cultivate and engage as many partners as possible in an ongoing way to generate broad community buy-in.
- Explore unexpected synergies between core elements and aspirations to achieve a unique experience and elevate the park’s relevance to a broad audience.

Next Steps

The first phase of this initiative focused on convening partners and the public in order to understand the river parks’ history, current context and opportunities. The next phase will be to dive deeper into understanding what’s possible, what’s desired and how to overcome obstacles in order to plan and implement a sustainable long-term vision.

We will begin by spearheading research on key issues such as water flow augmentation, governance, operations and financing, health, social welfare and economic impacts associated with the river and park. As we do this work, we will look for opportunities to leverage downtown's transformation and take advantage of opportunities to align with other initiatives, developments and funding sources. Finally, we will analyze, identify and make recommendations on the most advantageous governance and financing model and work closely with partners to strengthen and evolve the existing governance entity and develop the capacity for fundraising and advocacy to implement a cohesive and sustainable long-term vision.

Throughout the process, SPUR will continue to coordinate with partners and engage the community. Plans include a study tour for key partners and stakeholders to visit model projects, public forums and convenings, "intercept" events along the river to gather community feedback and a public exhibition showcasing alternatives informed by our research and the community's input.

The future of the Guadalupe River Park requires a truly comprehensive approach. It must not only tackle physical factors but address the concerns of key constituencies and protect sensitive habitat. It must allow for innovation and engagement on a greater scale than has ever been feasible. And, most importantly, it must strengthen the current governance and operations model to ensure sustainable long-term stewardship of San Jose's central park. The time is right to capture the momentum and excitement around downtown's transformation and create a great public space teeming with life and activity.

Appendix

The following is a summary of plans that the Guadalupe River Park Conservancy, Santa Clara Valley Water District, City of San Jose and others have developed for the Guadalupe River throughout the years.

Plan	Core Components	Timeline and Cost	Sponsorship and Purpose
Guadalupe River Park Master Plan, 1995	Arena Green, McEnery Park, Confluence East, Corps of Engineer flood protection system	1992-2004 \$242 million ¹⁰	City of San Jose Santa Clara County Board of Supervisors Santa Clara Valley Water District Corps of Engineers
Guadalupe Gardens Master Plan, 2002	Green waste facility, garden center, greenhouse, and community gardens	Capital costs: \$5,893,000 (2002 dollars) Operating cost: \$350,000 (annual) and \$100,000 one-time (for vehicle and equipment purchases)	City of San Jose: Airport Department City of San Jose: Parks, Recreation & Neighborhood Services Department
Guadalupe River Park Master Plan, 2002	Open space, riparian habitat restoration, linear urban park, 100-year flood protection, trail system, education and cultural resources	Master Plan dated 2002	City of San José San Jose Redevelopment Agency Santa Clara Valley Water District United States Army Corps of Engineers
Guadalupe River Park & Gardens Urban Design Guidelines for Development Adjacent to the Guadalupe River, 2003	Development promoting the ecology of the river including new open space and extending the city and the urban life of downtown to and across the river	Adopted October 7, 2003	San Jose Redevelopment Agency Board City of San Jose
Pfau Long Architecture Guadalupe River Park & Gardens Visitor Center 100% Building Concept Design, June 2007	Visitor's Center, exhibit area, library, gardens, and landscaping, with a focus on education, sustainability and water conservation	Proposed construction start date of April 2009 but has not yet begun Total estimated cost of \$18.5 million	
Guadalupe Gardens Design Guidelines & Implementation Strategy, 2008	Visitor center, dog park, park furniture, promenade, gateway entrance and new circuit trails north of Taylor Street	Guidelines and Strategy dated June 2008	Friends of Guadalupe River Park & Gardens City of San Jose
Ken Kay Visioning, 2009	Public art, sculpture garden and visitor's center	Divided into three phases: 1) 2010-2015, 2) 2016-2030, and 3) 2016 -2030 Proposed in 2009 and majority not completed	Friends of The Guadalupe River Park & Gardens
Confluence Area Activation Strategy, March 2017	Food purveyors, lighting, public art and recreation activities such as a rock wall	Next steps include prioritizing ideas and identifying funding	City of San Jose Department of Parks, Recreation and Neighborhood Services
Swenson Builders: The District @The Guadalupe River Walk, November 2017	3.8 million square feet of office, 2,400 residential units, 520,000 square feet of retail, 1,100 hotel rooms, rooftop parks, zipline, diverted stream, retail with a San Antonio Riverwalk style promenade, dining and shopping		Swenson Builders (a private developer-initiated study and design to encourage ambitious thinking and bold development along the river)

¹⁰ "Flood Control", Guadalupe River Park Conservancy, 2019. <https://www.grpg.org/flood-control/>