County Of San Diego

Board Of Supervisors

1600 Pacific Highway, Room 335, San Diego, California 92101-2470

Agenda Item

Date: **September 1, 2026** **15**

To: Board of Supervisors

Increasing Recreation Access and Opportunities at the El Capitan Reservoir by Funding the Boat Launch Ramp Extension (Districts: All)

Overview

On November 17, 2021 (7), the Board of Supervisors (Board) directed staff to explore partnerships with regional reservoir operators and provide County of San Diego (County) support to expand recreational programs and access at reservoirs throughout San Diego County. On March 15, 2023 (4), the Board approved additional actions to pursue funding opportunities and partnerships that would improve recreational access at regional reservoirs, including El Capitan Reservoir. Most recently, on October 1, 2025 (5), the Board directed staff to evaluate opportunities to enhance recreational conditions at El Capitan Reservoir, including exploring a partnership with the City of San Diego and identifying facility improvements that would expand public access. As part of this action, the Board approved allocating $2.4 million towards expanded hours and related staffing costs or for potential facility improvements at El Capitan Reservoir.

In response to the Board's direction, County staff prepared a report evaluating the feasibility of a County partnership with the City of San Diego, including a potential pilot project for the County to operate and maintain El Capitan Reservoir and explore potential service enhancements and facility improvements. Both staff from the City of San Diego and representatives of City of San Diego employees determined that transferring recreational operations was not feasible. However, County and City staff jointly identified several capital improvement projects to enhance recreational access at El Capitan Reservoir. Following the County's report, the City developed and provided its own preliminary engineering scope of work for extending the existing boat launch ramp, further refining one of the improvement options identified through the Board-directed process.

The need for this investment has become increasingly apparent as lower reservoir levels have often rendered the existing boat launch unusable. The City's preliminary engineering scope proposes extending the existing four-lane boat launch approximately 200 linear feet with a 60-foot-wide reinforced marine-grade concrete ramp, allowing boating access to continue during lower water

elevations, improving long-term recreational opportunities for residents throughout San Diego County, and optimizing revenue opportunities to support overall operations.

To further our partnership with the City of San Diego, we recommend allocating $2.5 million to the City of San Diego, upon approval of an agreement, for the construction of the El Capitan Reservoir Boat Launch Ramp Extension project. Because this amount is less than the City's $2.8 million estimate, we propose that the City and County collaborate and coordinate to pursue State and federal funding to support the El Capitan Reservoir Boat Launch Ramp Extension Project.

Once funding is appropriated for this project, based on staff review of previous agreements partnering with jurisdictions and existing authority, this initiative requires additional authority to negotiate and execute an agreement with the City of San Diego. If approved, this recommendation will allow staff to move forward with transfer of funds to the City of San Diego according to the terms of the resulting negotiated agreement. The agreement will contain, at a minimum, requirements that the funding be used for the purpose described above, state that the City of San Diego is responsible for the use of funds, design, construction, and completion of the project.

Investing in this project will improve recreational access, reduce interruptions caused by fluctuating reservoir levels, and provide the resources necessary to increase future operations at one of the County's most valued outdoor recreational resources for all County residents.

Recommendation by Supervisor Joel Anderson and Supervisor Monica Montgomery Steppe

1) Transfer appropriations of $2.2 million in one-time funding from the Office of Emergency Services (OES), Services & Supplies, to the Office of Economic Development and Government Affairs, Contributions to Others based on operational savings within OES from appropriations capacity that is not expected to be used; and allocate $2.2 million to partially fund an agreement with the City of San Diego for the El Capitan Reservoir Boat Launch Ramp Extension Project.

2) Establish appropriations of $300,000 in the Office of Economic Development and Government Affairs, Contributions to Others based on available prior year fund balance in the General Fund assigned for El Capitan Reservoir as of June 30, 2026 to fund the remaining costs for the El Capitan Reservoir Boat Launch Ramp Extension Project through an agreement with the City of San Diego. (4 Votes)

3) Upon establishment of appropriations of $2.5 million, direct the Chief Administrative Officer, or designee, to negotiate with the City of San Diego.

4) Direct the Chief Administrative Officer to pursue and apply for all available State and federal funding to support the El Capitan Reservoir Boat Launch Ramp Extension Project.

Equity Impact Statement

Residents across the County of San Diego rely on El Capitan Reservoir for affordable outdoor recreation. Limited recreational opportunities caused by fluctuating water levels disproportionately affect communities with fewer nearby recreational alternatives. Extending the

boat launch ramp would provide more reliable access for boating and fishing throughout the changing reservoir conditions, increasing opportunities for families, anglers, paddlers, and outdoor enthusiasts while improving recreational equity for residents in unincorporated San Diego County.

Sustainability Impact Statement
This action supports sustainable outdoor recreation by improving existing public infrastructure rather than developing new recreational facilities. Extending the existing launch ramp will improve operational resiliency, including the days and hours of operation, during varying water levels while minimizing repeated temporary repairs or operational disruptions. The project supports continued public enjoyment of an existing recreational resource while maintaining the reservoir's primary function as a drinking water supply.

Fiscal Impact
Funds for this request are partially included in the Fiscal Year 2026-27 Operational Plan in the Office of Emergency Services (OES) based on $2.2 million available prior year General Fund balance that was carried forward from the prior fiscal year and originally identified for the procurement of an infrastructure mapping system. Funds are no longer needed for the procurement due to the No Award determination on the Request for Proposals (RFP) 12872 for Critical Infrastructure Documentation Initiative Services. The conclusion of No Award was reached after no proposals met the County's requirements and because portions of the field documentation activities were duplicative to long-term efforts already underway at the County. Because of this determination, a total of $2.5 million previously allocated for RFP 12872 for Critical Infrastructure Documentation Initiative Services is no longer required for this project. The remaining $300,000 budgeted in Fiscal Year 2026-27 for Critical Infrastructure Documentation Initiative Services is proposed to be used for a grant to the East County Economic Development Council, subject to the approval of the Board in a separate agenda item

The additional $300,000 needed for this request is not included in the Fiscal Year 2026-27 Operational Plan. The funding source is available prior year assigned General Fund balance that was assigned for El Capitan Reservoir as of June 30, 2026.

If these recommendations are approved, a total of $2.5 million will be made available in the Office of Economic Development and Government Affairs for one-time funding for an agreement with the City of San Diego for the El Capitan Boat Launch Ramp Extension project. There will be no additional staff years.

Business Impact Statement
Improving reliable recreational access at El Capitan Reservoir is expected to increase visitation and support local businesses in East County communities. Expanded recreational opportunities could benefit bait and tackle shops, restaurants, convenience stores, fuel stations, and other recreation-related businesses that depend on reservoir visitors. The Friends of the San Diego Lakes have consistently identified extending the boat launch ramp as one of their highest priorities for improving recreational and revenue opportunities at El Capitan Reservoir.

Advisory Board Statement

Increasing Recreation Access and Opportunities at the El Capitan Reservoir by Funding the Boat Launch Ramp Extension (Districts: All)

N/A

Background

El Capitan Reservoir is one of San Diego County's premier outdoor recreation destinations and serves thousands of residents each year through boating, fishing, kayaking, canoeing, rowing, float tubing, and shoreline recreation. Located near the unincorporated community of Alpine, the reservoir is an important recreational resource for residents and visitors throughout San Diego County while serving its primary purpose as a drinking water reservoir for the City of San Diego. Because water supply remains the reservoir's primary function, recreational opportunities are directly affected by increasingly fluctuating water levels and operational requirements. These conditions have resulted in periodic closures, reduced boating opportunities, and inconsistent public access to El Capitan.

Recognizing the importance of expanding recreational opportunities at regional reservoirs, the Board has taken several recent actions to explore partnerships and investments to improve public access while maintaining water quality and protecting reservoir operations. On November 17, 2021 (7), the Board directed staff to evaluate opportunities to partner with regional reservoir operators to expand recreational access throughout the County. Building on that effort, on March 15, 2023 (4), the Board directed staff to pursue funding opportunities and partnerships to further expand recreational access at regional reservoirs. Most recently, on October 1, 2025 (5), the Board directed County staff to assess the feasibility of entering into an agreement with the City of San Diego that would allow the County Department of Parks and Recreation to operate and maintain recreational activities at El Capitan Reservoir under a pilot program modeled after the successful Lake Morena partnership. The Board also directed staff to evaluate facility improvements that could enhance recreational access and report back with recommendations.

Following discussions that included City of San Diego and County staff and representatives of City of San Diego employees, it was determined that County operation and maintenance of El Capitan is not currently feasible. Based on the City's commitment to maintain current hours and days of operation, County staff considered several options to support enhancing recreational operations and access at El Capitan Reservoir.

Among the alternatives evaluated, an extension of the existing boat launch ramp was identified as the highest priority. A permanent extension of the existing launch ramp will provide a durable solution capable of accommodating varying reservoir elevations while improving public access for boaters throughout changing seasonal conditions.

Community support for improving boating access has been consistent throughout the County's outreach efforts. Friends of the San Diego Lakes identified the extension of the El Capitan boat launch ramp as its highest infrastructure priority, noting that reliable boating access is essential to maintaining recreational opportunities, supporting fishing activity, and strengthening the local recreation economy, and optimizing revenue for overall operations.

Therefore, we are recommending that the County continue our collaboration by developing and entering into an agreement with the City of San Diego to support the El Capitan Boat Launch

Extension project and codify the City's commitment to maintain the ongoing staffing necessary to maintain the current days and hours of operation necessary at El Capitan Reservoir. We are also proposing that the City and County collaborate and coordinate to pursue additional funding opportunities at the State and federal level, including applying for the California Department of Fish and Wildlife's Boating Access Grant Program. This program provides competitive funding for the construction, renovation, and improvement of public boating access facilities throughout the state of California. This action will preserve recreational opportunities and ensure that El Capitan Reservoir remains a premier outdoor resource for residents throughout San Diego County.

Linkage To The County Of San Diego Strategic Plan
This item supports the Sustainability (Environment) and Community (Quality of Life) initiatives in the County of San Diego's 2026-2031 Strategic Plan by preserving and enhancing outdoor recreational opportunities for residents throughout San Diego County, improving the resiliency of existing public infrastructure, and strengthening collaboration between the County and the City of San Diego to improve public access to regional recreational resources.

Respectfully submitted,

Joel Anderson
Supervisor, Second District

Monica Montgomery Steppe
Supervisor, Fourth District

Attachment(s)
Attachment A - Report Back On Enhancing Operational and Recreational Conditions at El Capitan Reservoir.pdf
Attachment B - SOW El Capitan.pdf