



While examining tracks in the sand created by tiny dune inhabitants, feeling the powerful wind and salt spray, and experiencing solitude among the vast, dramatic dune formations, it's remarkable to imagine that this unique ecosystem is so close to an urban setting.

04 Project Understanding

At the same time, this magical place is out of reach for some who live nearby. The five-mile route to the dunes from the City of Guadalupe is challenging without a vehicle and therefore, inaccessible to many residents. The sole entry to Rancho Guadalupe Dunes County Park and associated dune complex is along West Main Street, a narrow, sand-swept road through the back dunes, which is difficult to navigate by foot or bicycle.

The MIG Team has been interested in this project since we first visited the dunes and Dune Center over three years ago. We immediately recognized the tremendous value of a multi-use trail to connect Guadalupe and the greater

region to the nearby beach, and to expand awareness of the dunes' natural and cultural treasures.

Located just northwest of Guadalupe, the dune complex is recognized as a National Natural Landmark, as the second largest remaining dune system in California. Its towering 550-foot high dunes are the tallest on the west coast. The dunes and Santa Maria River Estuary are teeming with life, home to hundreds of species of rare plants and animals. From Guadalupe Dunes County Park, visitors can hike for miles along the beach, explore the adjacent Guadalupe-Nipomo Dunes National Wildlife Refuge, birdwatch, fish, surf, and simply enjoy nature. The area is also rich with history and culture. From the earliest Chumash Native American inhabitants to Cecil B. DeMille's buried Egyptian movie set of the 1920s, and free-spirited "Dunites" of the 1930s and '40s, the dunes provide a fascinating connection to the past.



With this feasibility study, the Coastal Conservancy has an exciting opportunity to advance a project that has been a community aspiration for many years. Beyond the ultimate beach destination, the proposed multi-use trail would link Guadalupe to Santa Maria via the future Santa Maria Levee Trail extension, and could provide safer walking and bicycling connections to destinations within Guadalupe. Further, the multi-use trail supports a number of General Plan and community-wide goals, such as:

- » Supporting health benefits through active transportation and recreation;
- » Connecting to regional bicycle routes;
- » Expanding opportunities for new linear parks and green infrastructure along the Santa Maria River;
- » Stimulating economic development with ecotourism; and
- » Enhancing opportunities to learn about nature, culture, and history.

Based on our preliminary research and experience, some potential challenges in identifying trail alignment options include:

- » Multi-jurisdictional collaboration;
- » Land use compatibility;
- » Conflicting objectives for recreation, active transportation, and preservation;
- » Public access barriers such as land ownership and existing infrastructure (Santa Maria Levee, culverts, utilities, at-grade crossings); and
- » Environmental considerations including sensitive flora and fauna, protected habitats, proximity to hazardous materials, flooding, and coastal processes such as sand transport, wave runup, and sea level rise.

Potential means to address these challenges are discussed more specifically in our Project Plan. Our technical expertise, ability to forge connections with multiple jurisdictions and stakeholders, and understanding of Guadalupe’s unique context will also help overcome challenges. The MIG Team’s general approach will draw on the following elements to guide a robust process of identifying trail alignment alternatives for more detailed analysis:

- » Unique to Guadalupe
- » A Process that Builds Bridges
- » Grounded in Technical Expertise
- » Catalytic Potential

Unique to Guadalupe

A successful project will rely on understanding the unique context and people of Guadalupe. With a population just over 7,000, Guadalupe is literally a “small” town, characterized by safe, family-friendly neighborhoods, patchworks of farmland, some industrial uses, and a small historic downtown Central Business District. The Dunes Center is an important community hub and natural history museum that offers guided dune tours and environmental education for area youth. Juda Baca Guadalupe murals brighten public spaces and reflect Guadalupe’s predominant Mexican cultural heritage (over 85% of the population). Most residents work in agriculture or construction, many earn low incomes and do not own cars, and Guadalupe has the highest percentage per capita bus ridership in Santa Barbara County.

Residents need safe bicycle and pedestrian access to major nearby recreational resources, including the ocean and dunes. Insight from a broad spectrum of community members—including residents, property owners, and other stakeholders—about possible trail alignments is essential. The MIG Team will work closely with Conservancy staff and Project Advisory Team members to craft an outreach and communication strategy that will best resonate with Guadalupe residents. We will explore alternative workshop formats, such as collaborating with a popular event at the Dunes Center or holding an outdoor meeting in tandem with other well-established events or at busy locations. Meetings should consider work schedule, childcare, and transportation needs. Our process involves a seasoned MIG bilingual facilitator, as well as Continental Interpreting Services, Inc. (CIS), professional translators/interpreters to provide meeting support, develop outreach materials, and document the process in Spanish. We aim to create a comfortable environment that will enable community members to contribute ideas and be part of the “solution.”

A Process that Builds Bridges

An important part of the planning process will be understanding how this project fits within the complex framework of identified restoration projects, other local, county, regional, state, and federal projects, and complicated land owner and access issues. We expect to face tensions in harmonizing the desire for trail access with the critical need to preserve farmland and habitat. There are a number of challenges, including Conservation easements and Williamson Act contracts.

Permitting and coordination requirements may involve California Department of Fish and Wildlife/ Office of Spill Prevention and Response, California Coastal Commission, US Fish and Wildlife Service, US Army Corps of Engineers, and others.

Our approach seeks to build bridges through strong multi-jurisdictional collaboration and outreach to land owners. Early collaboration will help identify potential tools and resources that may have already been developed through other projects and can lay the groundwork for initial alignment feasibility investigation. The MIG Team has well-established connections with the Santa Barbara County Planning and Development Department, Parks Department, and Department of Public Works, California Coastal Commission, and resource agencies. Further, we have worked with agencies, trusts, non-profits, and others on similar projects with complex multi-stakeholder involvement resulting from a Natural Resource Damage Assessment (NRDA) determination. We look forward to sharing what we have learned to benefit the Guadalupe to Beach Trail project.

Grounded in Technical Expertise

The MIG Team is familiar with the physical constraints of the area, such as coastal processes and hazards, infrastructure and right-of-way constraints, and the biological and cultural resources of concern in the study area including Environmentally Sensitive Habitat Areas (ESHA), snowy plover, California least tern, California red-legged frog, California tiger salamander, and other coastal species. We comprise a diverse group of landscape architects, planners, biologists, and engineers with extensive expertise in trail planning and design, coastal and wetland restoration, and recreation planning. We also offer CEQA/NEPA services and experience in all aspects of biological consulting.

While the scope of work does not require comprehensive environmental documentation, our depth of technical knowledge will enrich this foundational feasibility study. Our expertise enables us to be more strategic in pursuing realistic alternatives. Further, our depth of experience could provide continuity and efficiency in future phases of work.





Catalytic Potential

The City has come close to bankruptcy in the past, unemployment rates are high, incomes are low, and just over 10% of residents over age 25 hold an Associates degree or higher. The MIG Team recognizes that opportunities for economic growth in Guadalupe are crucial. The General Plan calls out the City's intention to increase visitor serving potential through tourism infrastructure and amenities. The City of Guadalupe, "Gateway to the Dunes," holds promise as an attractive location for ecotourism. A multi-use trail connecting the greater region to the rich culture and history of Guadalupe and the landmark dunes has potential to drive business growth and increase revenue for the City and local businesses. Further, a multi-use trail, and possible related spin-off projects, could provide more vibrant public spaces for residents to enjoy.

Our approach envisions possibilities for the trail as a highlight in the community that could spur additional positive growth. We will work with stakeholders to consider strategic trail alignments that could capitalize on Guadalupe's assets and places of interest, such as the Dunes Center, parks, historic resources, and local businesses.

While, trail design details will be developed in subsequent phases, we offer foresight and vision to inform alignment for maximum future benefits. As urban planners and landscape architects, the MIG Team brings expertise in designing vibrant public places, downtowns, and streets for living. We look beyond trails as simply connections and are excited to stimulate conversations about how multi-use trails can fuel nearby commerce to serve locals as well as tourists, become thriving places that provide natural stormwater drainage, support leafy tree canopy and clean air, feature pocket parks or social centers of activity, display artistic features and historic interpretive elements, and more.

The drama of the Dunes and Estuary could be the traveler's reward after a memorable trail adventure along the Santa Maria River.