

Dignitaries cut ribbon for new Santa Ana Boulevard Bridge

Critical step in dam removal completed

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Agencies and stakeholders celebrated a crucial step toward the removal of Matilija Dam on Monday, Oct. 17, while remaining upbeat about future funding opportunities.

"Today is one step," said 37th District Assemblyman Steve Bennett, prior to cutting the ribbon on the new \$13.4 million Santa Ana Boulevard Bridge in Oak View. "We have many more to go."

The Ventura County Public Works Agency began construction on the project in April 2021, replacing an old bridge that constricted the floodplain with one that will enhance sediment transport and fish passage. "It's just one of the early steps to bring the dam down, but it's very symbolic of the kind of steps that we have to take," Bennett told the Ojai Valley News at the event.

Five other infrastructure projects need to be completed before the obsolete, 75-year-old dam can be taken down, including another bridge, three new or improved levees to provide better flood protection, and improvements at the Robles Fish Passage Facility. "All that has to be done for us to get to the ultimate goal, which is removing Matilija Dam and restoring the

natural run of the river, all the way back to the headwaters," said Bennett.

"It's a modern bridge," said Glenn Shephard, director of Watershed Protection with the Ventura County Public Works Agency. "It sits higher, it sits wider." The three-span, 350-foot-long bridge is also 140 feet longer than the bridge it replaces, and meets current seismic standards.

According to Shephard, completion of the bridge represents a major milestone in the Matilija Dam Ecosystem Restoration Project, begun more than 20 years ago. "We're building momentum, going forward through the rest of this decade, looking to get the rest of the infrastructure in place so we can get toward taking down the dam and restoring the Ventura River ecosystem," he said.

The bridge project was fully funded by a grant from the California Department of Fish and Wildlife, and now county officials and stakeholders are hot on the trail of additional funding to get the other five projects completed, Shephard said.

In August, 1st District Supervisor Matt LaVere met in Sacramento with the project's three major funding partners — CDFW, the Wildlife Conservation Board, and the State Coastal Conservancy. "They've come together as a great coalition to look at and champion state funding," Shephard said.

Joining state agencies at the ribbon cutting were representatives from the federal government,

which also may have additional funding available for the Matilija Dam Ecosystem Restoration Project, according to Shephard. "The federal government is in a seemingly similar position, and we're looking for all support from both federal and state to come to fruition to help deliver the rest of the downstream infrastructure in support of final dam removal," he said.

LaVere told the OVN his meeting this summer in Sacramento was encouraging. "The meeting started with, 'Matt, we have so much money. How much can you use?' And we forgot our wheelbarrows!" he said.

So far, nearly \$30 million of the estimated \$190 million needed for the total dam-removal project has been raised, and LaVere said the time is ripe to go after additional funding. "We're at this really unique time when we have access to so much state, federal and non-profit money. We have plans in place to take that money and put it to good use. We can't miss this opportunity," he said.

The Santa Ana Boulevard Bridge is the first visible construction project of the Matilija Dam Ecosystem Restoration Project and shows that project partners haven't forgotten about Matilija Dam, according to LaVere. "Quite the opposite. We're working every day to get that dam down and we're making great progress. With several more projects coming up, soon enough that dam is going to be down," he said.

According to Shephard, the next



Ojai Valley News photos by Perry Van Houten

Cutting the ribbon on the new Santa Ana Boulevard Bridge on Monday, Oct. 17, are, from left, Meiners Oaks Water District board member Loni Anderson, Ventura County CEO Sevet Johnson, 1st District Supervisor Matt LaVere, 37th District Assemblyman Steve Bennett, California Coastal Conservancy Executive Officer Amy Hutzell, and Wendy Motta, senior district representative with Rep. Salud Carbajal's office in Santa Barbara.

project up for completion will likely be a new bridge at Camino Cielo. The Wildlife Conservation Board and the State Coastal Conservancy granted nearly \$2 million in design funding for the bridge that will allow higher flows and sediment transport. "Right now, it's a low-water crossing, but that's aiming to be the next project on the list," he said.

At an update meeting on the Matilija Dam Ecosystem Restoration Project on Oct. 6, agencies and stakeholders involved in the project said that with luck and commitment the first release of sediment from behind the dam could occur by the end of the decade.

For more information on the project, visit <https://matilijadam.org>.





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Leaders with pragmatic green climate-crisis solutions

Here are three examples of common-sense, effective climate policies they will explore:

● Follow Sierra Club in promoting green, small-unit, compact housing near schools, shops, and transit for a range of incomes.

Providing affordable housing for Ojai's workforce will dramatically reduce our largest source of greenhouse gas emissions in the Valley – car commutes. Cool Climate Network found that low-impact, infill held the greatest opportunity to reduce GHG (greenhouse gases).

● Eliminate minimum parking mandates for residential or commercial projects.

These mandates drive up costs, consume precious real estate and encourage more driving, which results in more traffic, less livability and more climate pollution. Starting in 2023 cities in California will no longer be able to impose parking minimums for housing, retail, or commercial developments that sit within half a mile of major public transit stops. This law does not apply to Ojai, but can be duplicated here.

● Develop a comprehensive energy retrofit program for existing residential and commercial buildings.

Seek out federal, state and local utility funding and programs to provide energy audits to residences and business. Provide incentives to assist residences and business to upgrade their water and energy efficiency of their buildings, landscaping, appliances, and other building products.



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Ojai Valley Democrats



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