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August 30, 2019

Mr. Sean Paver
City of San Diego
Public Works Department
525 B Street, Suite 750 MS 980A
San Diego, CA 92101

Reference: Western Burrowing Owl Focused Survey Results for the La Media Road Widening Project
(RECON Number 9227)

Dear Mr. Paver:

This letter summarizes the results of the 2019 focused surveys for the western burrowing owl (*Athene cunicularia hypugaea*) conducted within the La Media Road Widening project site (project site). The project site is located in the city of San Diego along La Media Road, between State Route 905 (SR-905) and Siempre Viva Road, and along Airway Road from a point approximately 700 feet west of La Media Road to Avenida Costa Azul (Figures 1 through 4). The project site lies within portions of Sections 34 and 35 in Township 18 South, Range 1 West of the U.S. Geological Survey (USGS) 7.5-minute topographic map, Otay Mesa quadrangle (see Figure 2; USGS 1996), and the City of San Diego (City) 800' scale map, number 138-1761 (see Figure 3). An aerial photograph of the project site, including assessor's parcel numbers, is shown on Figure 4.

RECON Environmental, Inc. (RECON) biologists conducted western burrowing owl protocol surveys in suitable habitat in accordance with the guidelines developed by the California Department of Fish and Wildlife (CDFW; 2012). Breeding season surveys were conducted to determine the presence or absence of the species within the project site plus all potentially suitable habitat within 150 meters (hereafter referred to as survey area). No western burrowing owls were detected within the survey area. A discussion of the results of the conducted surveys is provided below.

Western Burrowing Owl

The western burrowing owl is a CDFW species of special concern (CDFW 2019). This subspecies of the burrowing owl is primarily restricted to the western United States and Mexico. A year-round resident in San Diego County, breeding western burrowing owls remain in only five primary areas in San Diego County, including Otay Mesa, Imperial Beach, Naval Air Station North Island, Warner Valley, and Borrego Valley (Unitt 2004). Habitat for the western burrowing owl includes dry, open, short-grass areas with level to gentle topography and well-drained soils (CDFW 2012). These areas are also often associated with burrowing mammals (Haug et al. 1993). Western burrowing owls are known to use multiple burrows, called "satellite" burrows, in addition to their nesting burrows. These non-nesting burrows are used to seek protection from predators and for roosting during the non-breeding season (CDFW 2012).

The western burrowing owl is diurnal and typically perches during daylight at the entrance to its burrow or on adjacent structures, such as low posts. Nesting occurs from March through August. Western burrowing owls form a pair bond for more than one year and exhibit high site fidelity, reusing the same burrow year after year (Haug et al. 1993). The female remains inside the burrow during most of the egg laying and incubation period and is fed by the male throughout brooding. Western burrowing owls are opportunistic feeders, consuming a diet that includes arthropods, small mammals, birds, and occasionally amphibians and reptiles (Haug et al. 1993).

Urbanization has greatly reduced the amount of suitable habitat for this species. Other contributions to the decline of this species include the poisoning of fossorial mammals, road and ditch maintenance, and collisions with automobiles (CDFW 2012).

Survey Methods

Habitat Assessment

Prior to conducting field investigations, historical data sources, including the California Natural Diversity Database, San Diego Biological Information and Observation System, and previous survey results provided by the City, were consulted for available information of known western burrowing owl observations in the project vicinity. San Diego Biological Information and Observation System records indicate two previous observations, approximately 200 feet and 460 feet west of La Media Road, near the southern limit of the survey area. No previous California Natural Diversity Database records were found for the survey area within the wildlife databases. Based on data provided by the City, five occupied burrows were also observed to the southwest of the La Media Road and Airway Road intersection in 2016.

RECON biologists Brian Parker and Andrew Smisek conducted a habitat assessment on March 29, 2019, in conjunction with a general biological survey. The biologists assessed vegetation communities and characteristics for potential to support burrowing owls. Vegetation community classifications in this report follow Oberbauer et.al. (2008), which is based on Holland (1986).

Focused Survey Methods

RECON biologists Beth Procsal, Alex Fromer, and Eddie Williams conducted western burrowing owl focused surveys in accordance with the guidelines developed by the CDFW (2012). The current surveys included a habitat assessment and four breeding season western burrowing owl surveys conducted within the survey area, as defined above (Figure 5). Meandering transects were walked through all suitable habitat identified within the survey area, with focused attention on locations where western burrowing owls or burrows had been previously detected. All wildlife species observed during the surveys were noted. Survey dates, times, and weather conditions are provided in Table 1.

Date	Survey Type	Surveyors	Beginning Conditions	Ending Conditions
3/29/2019	Habitat Assessment	B. Parker A. Smisek	09:45 a.m.; 60°F; 1–3mph; 10% cc	15:10 a.m.; 67°F; 5–8mph; 20% cc
4/4/2019	Western Burrowing Owl Survey #1	B. Procsal, A. Fromer	6:50 a.m.; 55°F; 0–1 mph; 100% cc	10:00 a.m.; 66°F; 1–2 mph; >95% cc
4/25/2019	Western Burrowing Owl Survey #2	B. Procsal, A. Fromer	6:45 a.m.; 57°F; 0-1 mph; 100% cc	9:10 a.m.; 64°F; 0–3 mph; <5% cc
5/30/2019	Western Burrowing Owl Survey #3	B. Procsal, A. Fromer	7:05 a.m.; 60°F; 0–1 mph; 100% cc	9:35 a.m.; 64°F; 0–2 mph; >95% cc
6/27/2019	Western Burrowing Owl Survey #4	A. Fromer E. Williams	7:45 a.m.; 63°F; 1–3mph; 100% cc	10:00 a.m.; 68°F; 2–4 mph; >10% cc

°F = degrees Fahrenheit; mph = miles per hour; % = percent; cc = cloud cover.

Survey Results

Habitat Assessment Results

The project site consists of a section of La Media Road and Airway Road. SR-905 is located to the north, while Siempre Viva Road marks the southern limit of the project site (see Figure 4). The survey area is adjacent to commercial development to the east and undeveloped land to the north and west. Nearby commercial developments include a gas station and truck stop, truck storage, warehouses, and sales lots.

Surrounding undeveloped land consists of grassy fields, which may have historically been used for agriculture. Several existing roadways transect the survey area, including La Media Road, Airway Road, and Siempre Viva Road. Additional roadways and highways, including SR-905, are located nearby. Two soil types occur within the survey area: Huerhuero loam, 2 to 9 percent slopes, and Stockpen gravelly clay loam, 2 to 5 percent slopes (U.S. Department of Agriculture 1973).

The survey area supports 10 land cover types: vernal pool, freshwater marsh, open water, Diegan coastal sage scrub, disturbed Diegan coastal sage scrub, mule fat scrub, southern willow scrub, non-native grassland, disturbed land, and urban/developed (see Figure 5). Of these, Diegan coastal sage scrub, disturbed Diegan coastal sage scrub, non-native grassland, and disturbed land are the most likely to provide suitable habitat for western burrowing owl (CDFW 2012) and are described in more detail below.

Diegan coastal sage scrub occurs in a single patch just south of the SR-905 off-ramp in the northern portion of the survey area. This area consists of a mix of California sagebrush (*Artemisia californica*), California encelia (*Encelia californica*), California buckwheat (*Eriogonum fasciculatum*), and mule fat (*Baccharis salicifolia*). Vegetation cover in this area is moderate, with dense 75 percent cover along the fence that lines the off-ramp and La Media Road, to approximately 30 percent in the rest of the patch away from the fence. As it is a small, narrow patch of vegetation, the Diegan coastal sage scrub provides only low quality habitat for western burrowing owl.

Disturbed Diegan coastal sage scrub occurs as a single, small patch on the east side of La Media Road north of Airway Drive. It is dominated by broom baccharis (*Baccharis sarothroides*), California encelia, California buckwheat, fennel (*Foeniculum vulgare*), crown daisy (*Glebionis coronaria*), black mustard, bristly ox-tongue (*Picris echioides*) and hairy vetch (*Vicia villosa*). Vegetation cover in this area is approximately 75 percent, with approximately half of the cover by non-native species. The height of the vegetation varies from three to six inches, herbaceous species dominate, to four to six feet or more where the broom baccharis, fennel, and black mustard dominate. Due to the abundance of dense, tall cover, this area provides low quality habitat for western burrowing owl.

Non-native grassland is the dominant vegetation community to the west of La Media Road. Vegetation is moderately dense to very dense with a ground cover of 80 to 100 percent, and approximately two to four feet high. In addition, dying vegetation created a very thick thatch with no bare ground in sight. This habitat was dominated by ripgut brome (*Bromus diandrus*), wild oat (*Avena* sp.), barley (*Hordeum* sp.), and crown daisy, with scattered of salt grass (*Distichlis spicata*) and black mustard (*Brassica nigra*). Based on the density of moderately tall vegetation, the non-native grassland provides low habitat value for western burrowing owl.

Disturbed land is occurs in several locations within the survey area. The two largest patches of disturbed land occur (1) northeast of the intersection of Airway Drive and La Media Road, and (2) northwest of the intersection of Siempre Viva Road and La Media Road. Additionally, it occurs along the edges of most roadways throughout the survey area. In general, the disturbed land is dominated by crown daisy, black mustard, and red brome (*Bromus madritensis*), with notable amounts of rat-tail fescue (*Festuca myuros*), rye grass (*Lolium* sp.), Russian thistle (*Salsola tragus*), crown daisy, long-beak filaree (*Erodium botrys*), and soft chess (*Bromus hordeaceus*). The disturbed land in the southern portion of the survey area is open, with generally lower overall vegetation cover and during the early April and May surveys, the vegetation varied in height from 6 to 24 inches. In the later surveys, vegetation was taller, up to three feet. Thus, it provided moderate habitat value for western burrowing owl during the earlier surveys, but as the vegetation height increased, the habitat value became poor. In the northern portion of the survey area, vegetation is denser and from two to four feet in height, with tall patches of black mustard at approximately eight feet or more. Thus, the disturbed land in the northern portion of the survey are provided low quality habitat for western burrowing owl.

Focused Survey Results

Meandering transects were walked through all suitable habitat identified within the project and buffer areas, and no western burrowing owls, no sign, and no potential burrows were observed during any of the western burrowing owl surveys. Although the survey area contains some characteristics suitable for burrowing owl (e.g., Diegan coastal sage scrub, non-native grassland, and disturbed land), currently there is a low potential for burrowing owls to use the survey area due to dense cover and abundant thatch, which limits rodent activity over the majority of the area. Such dense vegetation is not ideal for western burrowing owls, which prefer more open habitat with high visibility from their burrows. Although owls and/or sign have been historically observed within the survey area, the current conditions are largely unsuitable for the species (Photographs 1–4; see Figure 5).

As site conditions may vary over time and western burrowing owl has been known to occur in the survey areas in the past, pre-construction surveys may be required at least 14 days prior to ground disturbance to detect the presence of burrowing owls and inform necessary take avoidance actions. These surveys would include all areas where Diegan coastal sage scrub, disturbed Diegan coastal sage scrub, non-native grassland, or disturbed land are present within the survey area at the time (CDFW 2012).

If you have any questions concerning the contents of this letter, please contact me at kchappaz@reconenvironmental.com or Brian Parker at bparker@reconenvironmental.com.

Sincerely,



Katy Chappaz
Biologist

CMC:sh:jg

cc: Megan Hickey, City of San Diego

References Cited

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Unitt, Philip

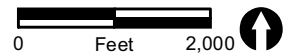
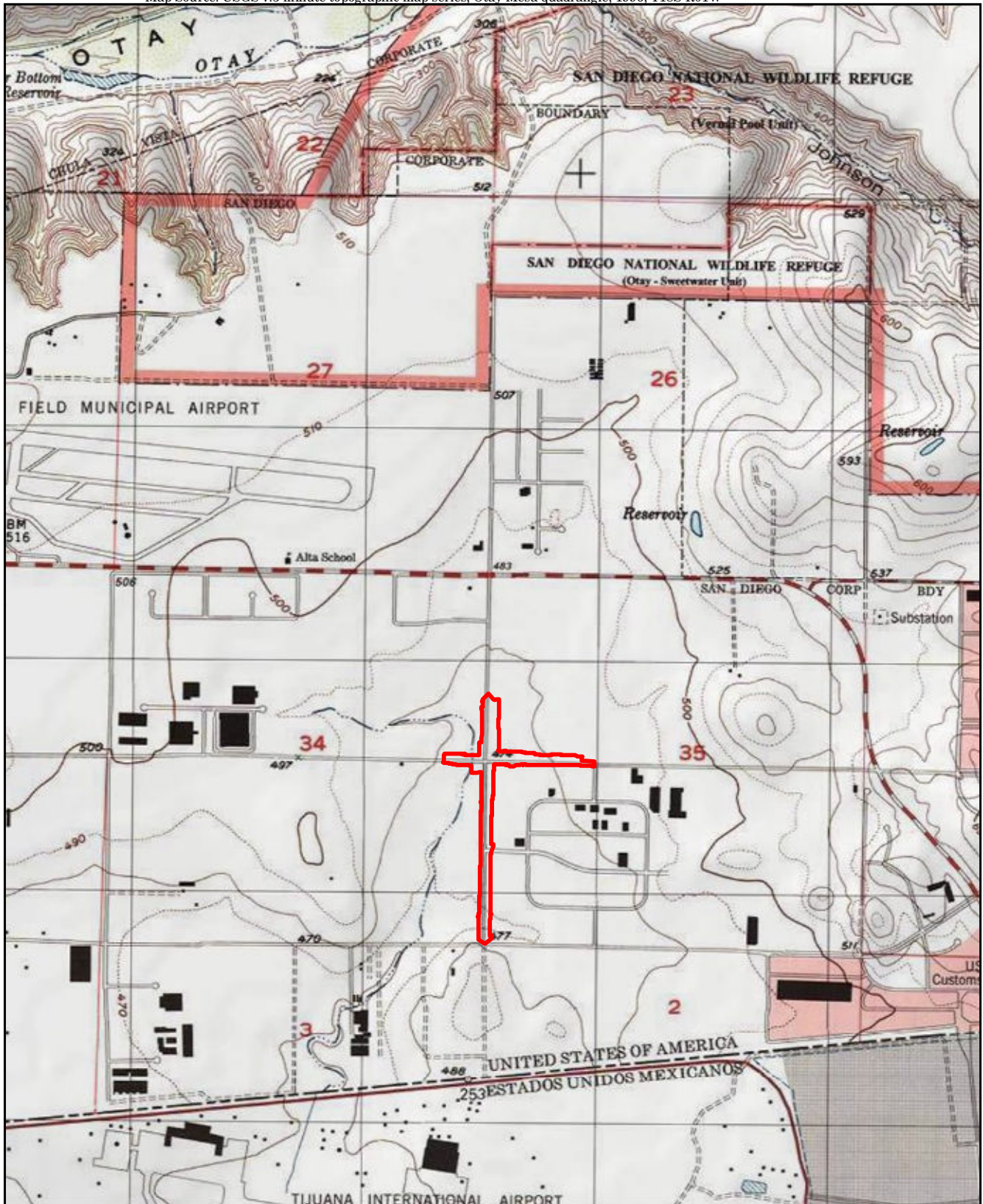
2004 San Diego County Bird Atlas. October.



***** Project Location

FIGURE 1

Regional Location
La Media Road Widening Project




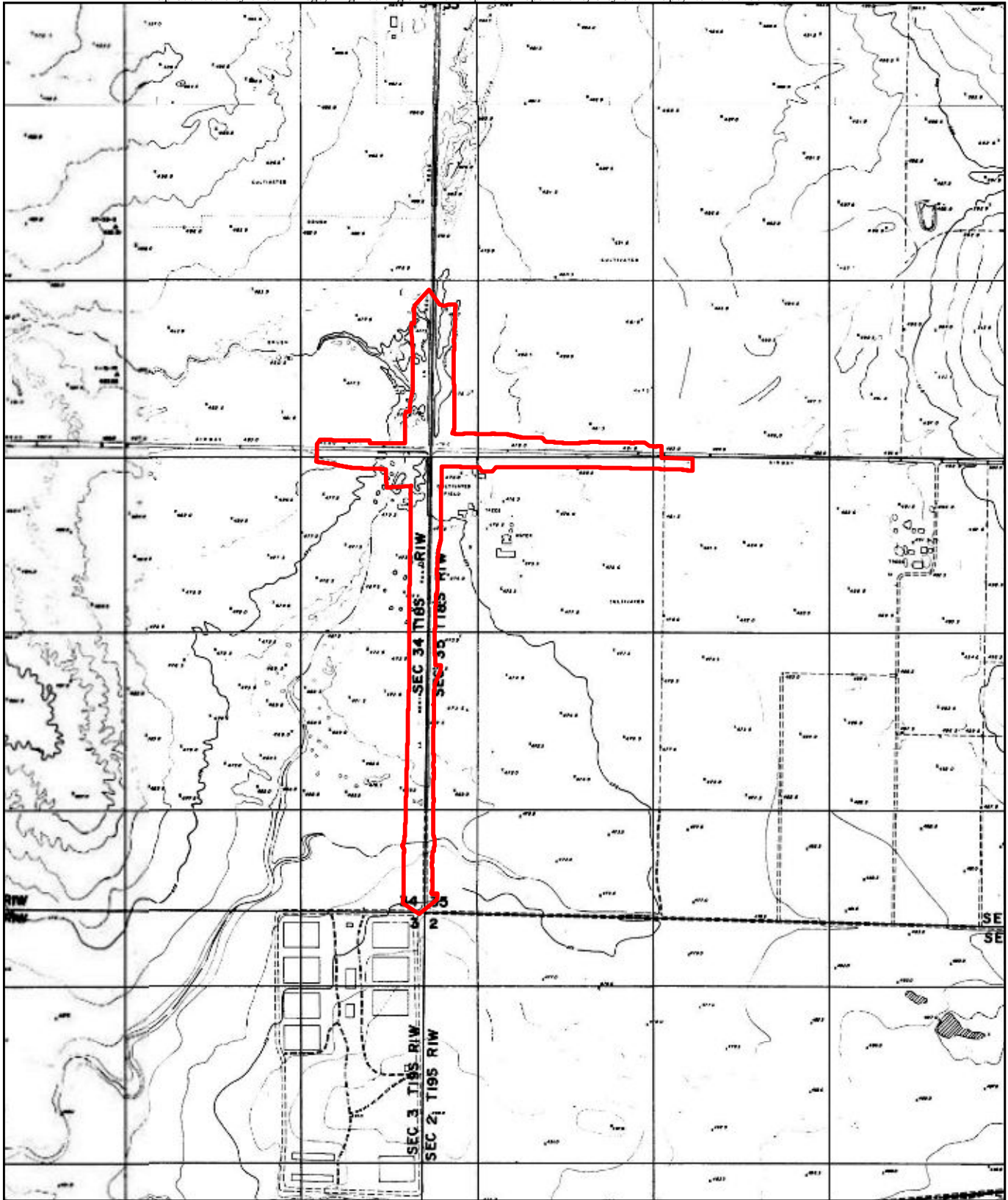
 Project Boundary

FIGURE 2

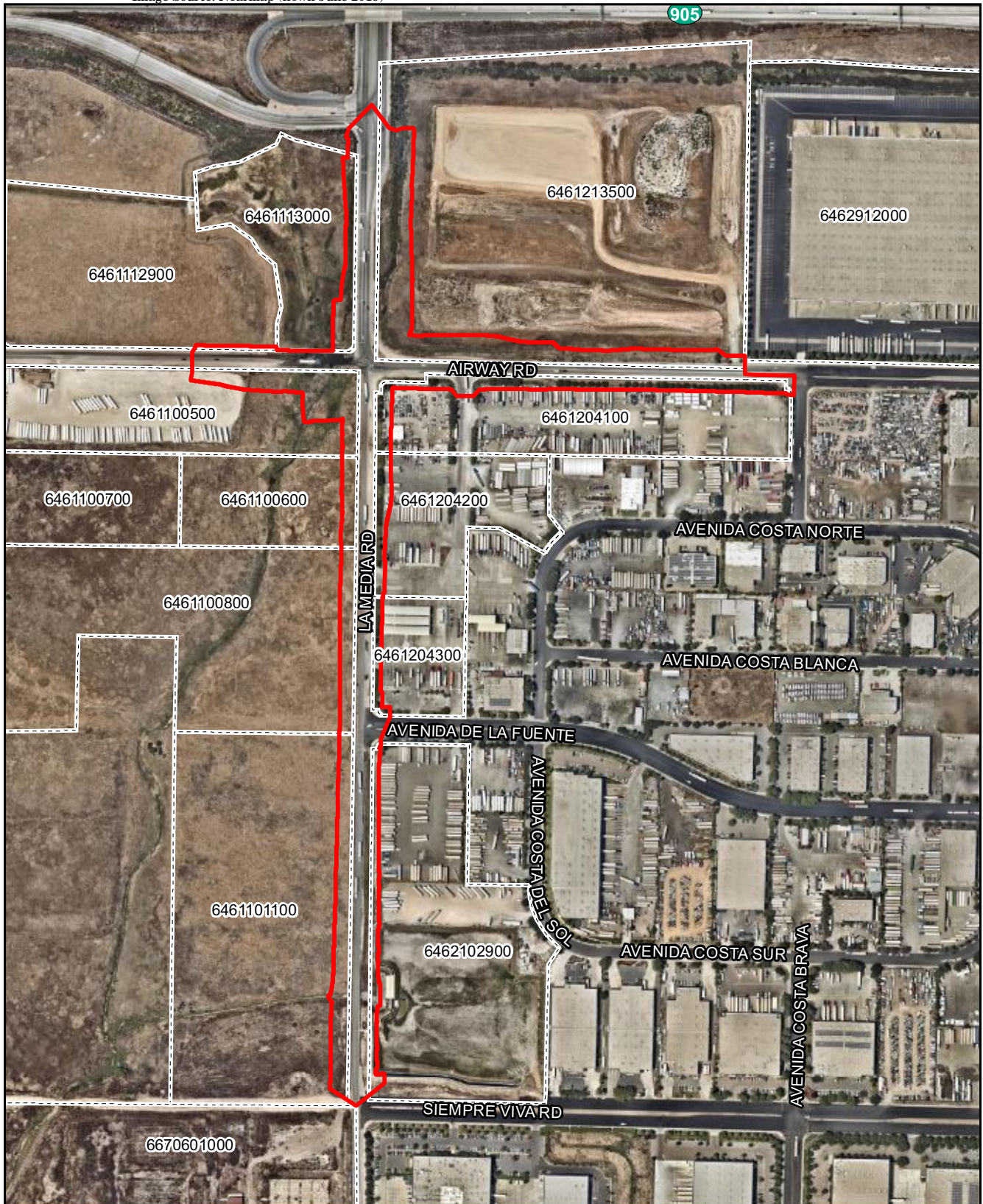
Project Location on USGS Map
La Media Road Widening Project



 Project Boundary

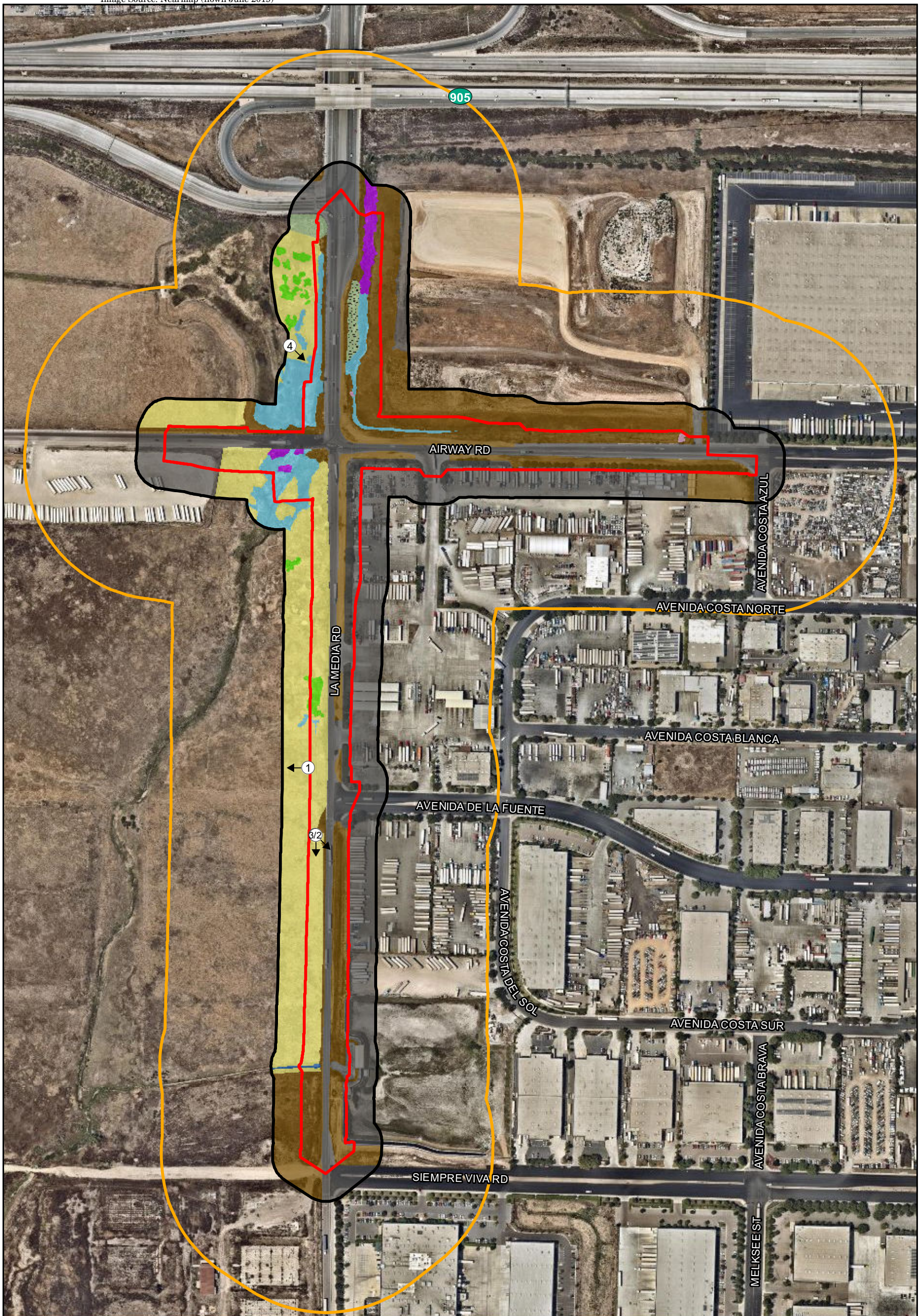
FIGURE 3







Project Location on City 800' Map
La Media Road Widening Project











 Project Boundary

FIGURE 4
Project Location on Aerial Photograph
La Media Road Widening Project



-  Photo Point
-  Project Boundary
-  Burrowing Owl Survey Area
-  Vegetation Survey Boundary
- Vegetation Community**
-  Vernal Pool
-  Freshwater Marsh

-  Open Water
-  Diegan Coastal Sage Scrub
-  Disturbed Diegan Coastal Sage Scrub
-  Mule Fat Scrub
-  Southern Willow Scrub
-  Non-native Grassland
-  Disturbed Land
-  Urban/Developed

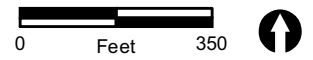


FIGURE 5
 Western Burrowing Owl
 Survey Area and Vegetation Communities
 La Media Road Widening Project



PHOTOGRAPH 1
Dense Non-Native Grassland and Lack of Open
Ground Near the Center of La Media Road
Widening Project Site, Facing West,
Photo Date: April 4, 2019



PHOTOGRAPH 2
Non-Native Grassland with Two- to Four-Foot-High Vegetation and
Lack of Open Ground Near the Southern End of La Media Road
Widening Project Site, Facing Southeast, Photo Date: April 4, 2019



PHOTOGRAPH 3
Non-Native Grassland with Minimal Open Ground Near the Southern
End of La Media Road Widening Project Site, Facing South,
Photo Date: May 30, 2019



PHOTOGRAPH 4
Dense Non-Native Grassland and Lack of Open
Ground Near the North End of La Media Road
Widening Project Site, Facing Southeast,
Photo Date: May 30, 2019