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Agencies and stakeholders celebrat ed 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 $33.6 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 work that we have to take,” Bennett said at the Ojai Valley News event.

Five other infrastructure projects need to be completed before the obsolete, 75-year-old dam can get toward taking down the dam and restoring the Ventura River ecosystem, “he said.

According to Shephard, completion of the bridge represents a major milestone in the Matilija Dam Ecosystem Restoration Project, began more than 20 years ago. “We’ve been 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 county officials and stakeholders are out 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 funders — CDFA, the Wildlife Conservation Board, and the State Coastal Conservancy — “They’ve come together as a great coalition to look at and champion state funding opportunities,” he 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 remarkably 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 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 $350 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 nonprofit 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 project up for completion will likely be a new bridge at Camino Carlos. 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 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.

For a list of participating agencies and partners, see story on page 1.