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New conservancy chief Stanley takes job in lean times

By Steve Scauzillo, Staff Writer
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Mark Stanley is the new executive director for the Rivers and Mountains Conservancy. (Watchara Phomicinda / Staff)

As Mark Stanley, the new Rivers and Mountains Conservancy Executive Director, walked by a glass display case near his new office, he gestured to an old menu from El Encanto restaurant - the Azusa Canyon landmark that once occupied the site of the RMC headquarters.

Australian Lobster: \$34.00. Shrimp Scampi: \$25.00

"Those were pretty high prices. I couldn't afford that then and can't afford it now," Stanley said with a smile.

Stanley and the RMC, whose full name is the San Gabriel and Lower Los Angeles Rivers and Mountains Conservancy, won't be splurging at all these days. The agency has no new funding sources and its old sources could dry up soon.

The agency's new director took a pay cut before accepting the job, he said, and that was after one top candidate turned down the position because the pay was too low, according to two sources close to the agency.

Stanley will earn \$87,000 a year to run the San Gabriel Valley's only state conservancy and to head up the joint-powers agency that manages new parkland property and projects, the Watershed Conservation Authority.

Two of the RMC/WCA's most well-known Valley projects are the Duckland Farms park off the 605 Freeway in Bassett and River Wilderness Park just outside the offices where Azusa meets the Angeles National Forest.

'I love the job'

Stanley, who characterized his salary as "low," said he took the job because of his personal interest in wildland

preservation and the urban environmental movement. But he has no background in conservation.

"I love the job. I love the idea of this job," said

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Stanley, 48, who has been at his desk for only five days. "This is a unique conservancy in that it is in an urbanized area ... so there is a greater opportunity to impact and educate so many people."

State Sen. Hilda Solis began the RMC in 1999. She felt the Valley was being cut out of environmental dollars by Westside groups.

The RMC's territory stretches from the San Gabriel Valley to parts of Long Beach and western Orange County. The agency doles out bond money raised through state ballot propositions and decides which projects to fund. So far, the RMC, one of 10 conservancies operating under the auspices of the California Resources Agency, has authorized 172 projects worth more than \$100

million.

#### Tough act to follow

Stanley has a tough act to follow.

Founding director Belinda Faustinos served for 12 years until her retirement earlier this year. Faustinos was well liked by local government and environmental groups. She came to the agency from the powerful Santa Monica Mountains Conservancy.

"You could not have had a better executive director. She brought with her a wealth of credentials in helping establish this new, first-ever conservancy within a highly urbanized area," said Claire Schlotterbeck, who heads the environmental group Hills for Everyone and serves on the Wildlife Corridor Conservation Authority, which is committed to buying land connecting wildlife habitat from Orange County to the Puente Hills.

"Belinda did an excellent job," said San Dimas City Councilman Dennis Bertone, who is the state Senate's representative on the RMC board.

Before Faustinos, "the San Gabriel Valley had not gotten its fair share of environmental funds," Bertone said.

#### Transit background

Stanley last worked as general manager of the Riverside Transit Agency. Before that, he worked for ATC/Forsythe as director of operations and planning for Foothill Transit.

"I was a little surprised that he didn't have more of a resource background," Schlotterbeck said.

Bertone, part of a three-person committee that screened applicants, also has heard the whispers about Stanley's lack of environmental credentials. But he's very happy with the board's choice.

"What impressed us (about Stanley) was his real interest in the environment," Bertone said. "He wasn't just looking for a job."

Indeed, during a 45-minute interview Thursday, Stanley got excited when talking about expanding his talents to include land acquisition, parks, restoration and community outreach.

"There's like this sea out there. I'm just sticking my feet in it. Then I'll swim," he said.

Stanley, who is a bicycle enthusiast, worked on a master's thesis project at Arizona State University that combined bike riding with public transportation. He helped convince the Phoenix Transit System to place front bike racks on buses on three routes. The bike racks became popular with college students and blue collar workers. Now, they are standard on most metro buses.

"It was a new idea at the time," he said.

#### Looking for money

In addition to his bent toward green transportation, Bertone said Stanley's skills in grant writing could prove helpful to the cash-strapped agency.

"There is money out there but you have to know how to get at it," Bertone said.

The agency has about \$6 million in unspent bond money, said Bertone, even though most of that is committed to projects. It may have to apply for private and government grants to stay afloat.

"There is no additional bond money coming in," Stanley said.

In the past, the agency would put out a call for new projects. Once these came in, it would decide which ones to fund. But the agency will not be putting out a call for projects for at least a year, Bertone said.

"These are leaner times. But we have to be smarter," he said.

Stanley said his first tasks will be to manage existing projects. At his office in the old El Encanto were several architectural renderings scattered on the floor and on his desk.

"We've got a number of exciting projects. I need to make sure they get completed," Stanley said.

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