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Restoring the 'Water Freeway'

How Los Angeles is turning its river from an afterthought into a destination.

By Lorelei Laird

In 1938, a 50-year storm dumped more rain on Los Angeles in one week than it normally saw in a year. The subsequent flooding of the Los Angeles River took at least 87 lives and caused \$78 million in property damage (in 1938 dollars). In the wake of the disaster, the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers began a heroic 21-year project to encase most of the river in a concrete channel.

More than 50 years after that work was completed, the city is changing course. Civic leaders launched the Los Angeles River Revitalization Master Plan in September 2005 to remove or moderate the concretization wherever possible. In doing so, they plan nothing less than a major overhaul of the river and its relationship to the city, transforming the forgotten channel into a 32-mile greenbelt they hope will revitalize the environment, communities, and the economy.

The plan is ambitious, with a time line of 20 to 50 years and costs in the billions. To make it a reality, planners have marshaled an army of resources and partners, working closely with the county and the Corps on still-vital flood control issues. Not every constituent is happy with the plan, and funding is problematic in the current economic climate. But the plan has strong advocates, in Washington as well as city hall.



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Force of nature

Because Southern California gets so little rain, the Los Angeles River slows to a trickle in the summer and swells during the winter rainy season. The seasonal variation makes it hard for the river to carve out a permanent channel, so it changed course numerous times before concretization, emptying into different bays many miles apart. This led to bad planning decisions when the city was young, with homes and businesses built right in the flood plain.

Not surprisingly, the city flooded every few years. In response to an especially bad flood in 1914, the Los Angeles County Flood Control District built a concrete channel in certain sections of the river. Those sections were left largely unharmed in the 1938 flood, leading an upset public to demand concretization of the whole 51-mile river.

That was the genesis of the Corps channelization project, which also created the Hansen and Sepulveda dams. In some ways, the concrete channel is a success: It has kept the city safe. But because the Corps of that era didn't consider the environment, it also profoundly and permanently changed the river's ecosystem. Perhaps as a result, the river is largely "invisible" — passersby could mistake it for a drainage ditch, with concrete slopes and no greenery. And because the riverfront is largely ignored, it attracts homeless camps, illegal dumpers, and graffiti.

In a city that the Trust for Public Land says has 6.2 acres of park space per 1,000 residents, planners see this as a missed opportunity. "The city's plan asks, how do we revitalize communities and how do we respect the river as a central part of the landscape?" says Carol Armstrong, codirector of the Los Angeles River Project Office under the city's Bureau of Engineering.

Armstrong says the river plan enjoyed strong support from some local officials who have a personal connection to the river because they grew up nearby. She cites Mayor Antonio Villaraigosa, city council members Ed Reyes (a former urban planner) and Tom LaBonge, and U.S. Rep. Lucille Roybal-Allard (D-Los Angeles).

Mia Lehrer, a landscape architect and urban planner involved in river issues, also gives credit to environmental and community activists, who teamed up when they realized that building river parks meets both groups' goals. "Instead of using a filter, you could also build a park, and the park becomes a filter," she says, because the park would remove pollutants from runoff before it drains into the river.

In 2002, the city council formed an ad hoc committee on the Los Angeles River, with Reyes and LaBonge heading it. By 2005, the committee was working on the Los Angeles River Revitalization Master Plan — with support from city departments and major partners such as the county, the Corps, and private contractor Tetra Tech. The plan also relied on input from riverfront communities — Armstrong counts 20 formal community meetings and 40 informal ones. Among the numerous smaller partners were neighboring cities such as Glendale and Burbank. City engineer Gary Lee Moore was tapped to head up the planning process — a natural choice, given the flood management function of the river, Armstrong says.

Armstrong says those working on the plan looked to other cities' successful river revitalization plans for inspiration. In particular, she cites the South Platte River in Denver, as well as successful projects in San Antonio, Chattanooga, Oklahoma City, and Omaha. International "sister rivers" with similar challenges — the Yarkon in Tel Aviv, the Cheonggyecheon in Seoul, and the Isar in Munich — also served as models. City officials and environmental advocates have visited all three to see how their redevelopment experiences could apply to Los Angeles.

The final Los Angeles River Revitalization Master Plan, adopted in May 2007, sets multiple, intertwined goals: ecological restoration and management, the creation of recreational open space, economic development (where appropriate), and the encouragement of a sense of community around the river. To achieve them, it names an estimated 240 projects, some of which Armstrong says were already under way when the plan was published.



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Details

Ecological restoration may be one of the plan's biggest challenges because complete concrete removal would bring back the risk of catastrophic floods. But the plan calls for removing at least some concrete. Compromises include restoring a soft bottom in some areas, creating stepped terraces along the banks, and removal of the concrete sides in a few places where floodplains can be created safely. Because the channel encourages a very fast flow in the rainy season — the "water freeway" — that is unsuitable for fish, the plan calls for flood storage, diversion, and even channel widening. Urban runoff would be treated or managed.

Environmental issues fall to the Corps and the county flood control district, since the agencies share authority over flood control on the river. To determine what's safe in areas where it has authority, the Corps in 2006 launched the Los Angeles River Ecosystem Restoration Feasibility Study. That ongoing study seeks to return the river to a more natural state. Josephine Axt, chief of planning for the Los Angeles District of the Corps, says flood control is a major planning constraint.

Axt believes the Corps would be unlikely to build the channel in the same way today, because it now recognizes the need for human recreation and environmental protection. But "with development right up to the banks," she says, "that really limits what [we] can do."

Planner Kathleen Bergmann of the Corps adds that the flood control considerations have required planners to find creative ways to control stormwater and other flood flows to the river, including side channels and underground culverts.

Planners envision parkland extending at least 250 feet from each bank, with walkways, a bicycle path, a few equestrian paths, and public art. But the plan doesn't end at the river's edge. In most areas, this 32-mile greenbelt is connected with existing destinations like parks, schools, neighborhoods, and businesses, using dedicated car-free paths and existing streets dressed up with river signage. The plan also calls for efforts to mitigate factors that limit river access, such as crime and dense industrial development.

In addition, the plan picks out five "opportunity areas," large regional parks that expand on the riverfront greenway. Chosen for their visibility and potential to meet the plan's goals, they stretch from Canoga Park in the San Fernando Valley to a downtown industrial area connecting with Boyle Heights. For example, the Chinatown-Cornfields Opportunity Area downtown would incorporate a nature preserve on an artificial island, picnic areas, a kayaking area, a riverfront amphitheater, and foot trails linked to nearby Elysian Park. Planners project that private industry would eventually begin putting restaurants and other entertainment outlets in the nearby streets, creating a need for pedestrian-friendly streets and river signage.

The economic development portion of the plan starts from the belief that all these improvements will increase private development, a lesson drawn from redevelopment projects in many other cities. It expects that riverfront activity would draw businesses catering to park users, such as cafes, hotels, and other entertainment destinations.

Overall, planners predict that every public dollar will attract four private redevelopment dollars, creating billions of dollars' worth of new development around the river. In addition to short-term tax and job benefits, the plan predicts tens of thousands of permanent jobs and a permanent tax-revenue increase of \$100 million or more.

The plan also points to hard-to-quantify benefits of river redevelopment, such as increased community pride. Ultimately, it seeks to create a sense that the river is a destination, a civic asset, and a desirable neighbor.





Pushing off

To implement and coordinate its many projects, the plan calls for three management agencies. The Los Angeles River Cooperation Committee is the governmental arm of management, intended to coordinate disparate river projects and prevent delays caused by poor communication. Formalized in 2009, it includes representatives from city and county agencies, along with a Corps representative serving as an advisor.

Also up and running is the Los Angeles River Revitalization Corporation, which coordinates public and private funding for river projects. The Los Angeles River Foundation, intended to coordinate philanthropy and nonprofit activity, will be the final piece of the management structure.

Despite the plan's time line of 20 to 50 years, Armstrong says a number of its projects are already under way. Several are new parks or park expansions, such as the North Atwater Park expansion, which coincides with the restoration of the adjacent North Atwater Creek. Another fully funded project is the county's Headwaters Greenway, which will create parkland and trails at the head of the river. It will eventually connect to neighboring greenways and incorporate a bike path.

Planners got some federal help last June, when the Los Angeles River was selected as one of seven pilot projects for the Urban Waters Federal Partnership, a project that brings together federal agencies to revitalize city waterways. Nancy Sutley, chair of the White House Council on Environmental Quality and former deputy mayor for environmental issues under Villaraigosa, was involved in the project.

Armstrong says Sutley was important in turning attention to Los Angeles. Being an Urban Waters river won't bring in more money right now, but advocates say it will help make the case for the river's significance and potentially for funding down the road.

Another major boost at the federal level came with a 2010 ruling that the Los Angeles River is a "traditionally navigable" river. This became a local political issue after the Corps declined to apply the designation to the entire river, a step that would have strengthened its Clean Water Act protection. David Castanon, chief of the regulatory division for the Corps Los Angeles field office, says the efforts were misguided, since most or all parts of the river would likely have been protected under the act anyway.

But the issue was resolved when the U.S. EPA stepped in and declared the entire river navigable, in response to petitions from river advocates. Castanon says regardless of its regulatory effects, the designation was helpful because it focused public attention on the river.

Lewis MacAdams, founder of the Friends of the Los Angeles River, agrees that the ruling had "tremendous political value." But he believes the change had value beyond public relations, because it brought in government entities with missions beyond flood control. "The designating of the LA River as a navigable waterway is the most profound change since the river was channelized," he says. "It lets all the other federal agencies come into the picture."

Challenges

Advocates are upbeat, but they admit that funding is a major challenge. For example, the city purchased land for a riverfront park in Lincoln Heights in October 2009 — but two years later, money for development had yet to come through. On the local level, Armstrong says the project has benefited from bonds passed by ballot initiatives years ago, before the economy tanked. Her office helps coordinate funding from diverse sources, and most projects require multiple funding sources.

Funding is also an issue for the Corps, which must seek congressional approval for every new project. Axt says Congress is often willing to authorize construction, but appropriations are hard to come by. And although the Los Angeles River work meets the criteria to be a priority, Axt says, the Los Angeles District Office has to compete with 37 other districts around the country for internal funding.

Gentrification is another challenge. The plan acknowledges that the anticipated new development could push out existing residents and reduce the stock of affordable housing. In response, the plan calls for measures like community involvement in development, policies encouraging affordable housing, and careful community planning. It also acknowledges a shortage of industrial land and calls for sharing redeveloped space with industrial uses and the railroads that run along the riverfront.

The plan has its share of critics. Armstrong says some river activists wanted the plan to address the entire 800-plus miles of watershed — an area she feels would have been too large to tackle with existing resources. Others suggested focusing on tributaries first. Armstrong acknowledges the value of that approach, but points out that the plan does encompass tributaries. MacAdams says he'd prefer more attention to the heavily industrial parts of downtown Los Angeles, which he says offer the greatest opportunities.

In the end, though, MacAdams would rather compromise than see the plan never implemented.

And it's a kind of victory to see how far the river has come in the 26 years he's been working on it.

"When I started FoLAR, I called it a 40-year artwork," he says. "It's something like building a subway system; [it's a] lifetime job."

Lorelei Laird is a Los Angeles freelance writer who specializes in the law and policy. Her website is www.wordofthelaird.com.

Sidebar: More Projects Afoot

Resources

Images: Top — The Fourth and First Street bridges in downtown Los Angeles span stretches of the river that are lined with industry. Photo by Lorelei Laird. Middle — Schoolchildren designed the archway with a frog motif that guards the entrance to Valleyheart Greenway in Studio City. Photo by Lorelei Laird. Bottom — Tujunga Wash as it was in 2006, when the Los Angeles River Revitalization Master Plan began, and the planners' vision for transforming it. Photo and rendering courtesy City of Los Angeles.

Plans & projects: Main website for the Los Angeles River Revitalization Master Plan: www.lariver.org

Find archived documents on an older website: www.larivermp.org

Friends of the Los Angeles River: www.folar.org

Piggyback Yard: <http://piggybackyard.org>

The River Project, a nonprofit focused on watersheds: www.theriverproject.org

The Santa Clarita Open Space Preservation District, the agency in charge of creating the city's greenbelt buffer: www.santaclaritaopenspace.com

LA Creek Freak, a group blog run by people who just like waterways: <http://lacreekfreak.wordpress.com>

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