VISION 2

LOS ANGELES RIVER REVITALIZATION MASTER PLAN

The Los Angeles River, through the Sepulveda Basin Flood Control and Recreation Area (2006)
Imagine, an active and revitalized Los Angeles River.
The River has been the heart of the City, providing life and form to Los Angeles ever since the indigenous Tongva people lived in the area thousands of years ago. The River’s path—from the narrow headwaters, through the fertile valleys, around the Hollywood Hills at Griffith Park, and out to the ocean—has shaped the development around it. Although not navigable like other classic urban rivers, the Los Angeles River is one of the most critical components of the City’s infrastructure—now rendering raging flood flows harmless to protect adjacent development.

In the process of altering the River for human purposes, we have erased the most dominant natural system in the City and created a highly-engineered infrastructure that robs our aquifers from replenishment, contributing to the need to import vast quantities of drinking water. We have eradicated numerous plant and wildlife species that contribute to a balanced environment, and have robbed people of the open space that is necessary for human health and well-being. And, by erasing the River’s natural system, we have taken away the essential childhood experience of learning through observing nature. Most of our neighborhoods lack any place where children can skip a stone, see the reflection of the sky, listen to the sounds of the croaking frogs or the rustle of willow leaves in the wind. Instead, we encourage our school children to participate in beach and river clean-ups and test water quality to determine our success in reducing heavy metals and other pollutants.

Most great cities are considered to be attractive places to live because they offer productive conditions for business, culture, and leisure. A great city should also be a healthy place without environmental hazards and one that provides the opportunity to live a healthy lifestyle. Adequate open space resources with land devoted to recreation are essential for a healthy population. In Los Angeles the amount of open space per thousand people varies from 32 acres in upper income areas, to less than 1 acre per thousand people in predominantly minority neighborhoods. (Sherer 2006) These are directly correlated with the public health epidemics of obesity and diabetes, which are highest among low income minorities. The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention has called for more parks, green space, and playgrounds to help reverse this health trend. (Sherer 2006)

Other benefits from increasing the number and size of open spaces in cities include: community pride, a sense of security, reductions in crime, and greater social well-being. An October 2006 article in National Geographic suggests that the presence of leafy green places, trees, and the beauty and scents of nature satisfy fundamental human, personal and social needs, and that cities are healthier in many ways when green places are preserved or re-created:

That we should find nature rejuvenating is hardly surprising. After all...[we] arose not in cinderbelt but in wild forests and grasslands. Our ears are made not for the stinging scream of sirens but for the sly scratch of a predator’s paws and the whistle of wind that warns of impending weather. Our eyes evolved to tease apart not the monotonous grays of cityscapes but the subtle gold, olive, and burgundy hues that signaled ripe fruit and tender leaves, and our brains to reward our sensory efforts with deep feelings of pleasure. (Ackerman 2006, p. 110)

The value of bringing nature back into urban areas through the planting of trees also has tangible restorative benefits regarding the removal of air pollutants, a reduction in the volume of greenhouse gases, and the cooling of heat islands caused from existing hard surfaces such as pavement and roofs. A study by the University of Illinois found that, “people living in buildings near green areas had a stronger sense of community and coped better with everyday stress and hardship.” (p. 112) Moreover, greener environments can result in lower crime rates and, according to the researchers, “children with attention deficit disorders showed reduced symptoms when they were exposed to natural environments.” (p. 112)

Given these possibilities, the Los Angeles River offers one of the greatest opportunities to revitalize the physical health of communities and the City as a whole. One of the most unique things about Los Angeles has been its ability to reinvent itself over time. The dramatic growth of the City’s urban population over the past century demands a corresponding change in the way public services are provided. Los Angeles has been a City of progress, but the value of our past should not be ignored. Our River was once a vibrant natural system that provided substance and maintained a healthy environment. Restoring and revitalizing the River can breathe new life into neighborhoods and nurture the souls of residents, becoming a springboard for the greater success of the City itself.
Imagine, a new habitat and water quality area at the confluence of the Verdugo Wash and the Los Angeles River.
Six decades after the Los Angeles River was first channelized, the City of Los Angeles faces an unprecedented opportunity to reverse the past and reenvision the River as the soul of the City. The Los Angeles River Revitalization Master Plan (the Plan) sets forth a bold vision for transforming the River over the next several generations. This Plan acknowledges that great and transformative change may not be accomplished in one lifetime, yet it must remain in the minds of the people who will carry it forward. Thus, the Plan includes bold long-term visions, but also nearer-term steps that will make the River a valuable, celebrated place.

The vision for the Los Angeles River’s revitalization includes four basic organizing principles:

- Revitalize the River
- Green the Neighborhoods
- Capture Community Opportunities
- Create Value

These organizing principles are the foundation around which the Plan’s goals have been identified. These goals stem from those first established by the City of Los Angeles’ Ad Hoc Committee on the Los Angeles River. Each of these four organizing principles, their supporting goals, and specific recommendations to achieve them are addressed in more detail in the chapters that follow.

1. REVITALIZE THE RIVER

The Los Angeles River is the catalyst that can drive many other revitalization initiatives. As a very long-term goal, its ecological and hydrological functioning can be restored through creation of a continuous riparian habitat corridor within the channel, and through removal of concrete walls where feasible. While completely restoring the 32-mile River to a naturalized condition is not likely feasible given flood control requirements and current urban development, it is likely that the River channel could be naturalized in significant stretches that are part of the Plan’s long-range vision.

Three goals complement the effort to begin to restore a functioning ecosystem. The first focuses on off-channel storage of peak flood flows in order to reduce flow velocities, which is a necessary precondition for additional greening of the River channel and for ecosystem restoration. Second, the Plan seeks to improve the quality of water within the Los Angeles River through implementation of a comprehensive, landscape-based system for treating stormwater runoff. Third, the River channel itself should offer safe public access—during periods of low flows—so that it becomes a focus for recreation and enjoyment in areas that are especially lacking in these amenities.

2. GREEN THE NEIGHBORHOODS

The overall beauty of Los Angeles can become incredibly enhanced through the creation of greener neighborhoods with more open space, trees, and parks. This second organizing principle, therefore, focuses on the goals of developing a continuous, 32-mile Los Angeles River Greenway that acts as the centerpiece of the City’s green space system. The River Greenway would be linked to an overall network of “green street” connections that extend the River’s influence into adjacent neighborhoods and provide safe, non-motorized access between the River and public open space. Further, as the River Greenway system develops, new linkages would be created that strengthen the connectivity between riparian systems along the River, upland habitat in parks and natural open space, and functional habitat in the mountains.

Complementary goals include “re-purposing” schoolyards, underused property, and other public and private open spaces for multipurpose—even temporary—shared use; cleaning stormwater through the use of best management practices (BMPs) in public landscapes; strengthening the River’s identity by using signature elements, such as gateways and innovative bridges; and creating a program to introduce more opportunities for art along the River.

3. CAPTURE COMMUNITY OPPORTUNITIES

Make the River the Focus of Activity
- Foster Civic Pride
- Engage Residents in the Community Planning Process and Consensus Building
- Provide Opportunities for Educational and Public Facilities
- Celebrate the Cultural Heritage of the River

4. CREATE VALUE

- Improve the Quality of Life
- Increase Employment, Housing, and Retail Space Opportunities
- Create Environmentally-Sensitive Urban Design and Land Use Opportunities and Guidelines
- Focus Attention on Underserved Areas and Disadvantaged Communities
Imagine a linked and accessible confluence of the Arroyo Seco and the Los Angeles River.
3. CAPTURE COMMUNITY OPPORTUNITIES
In the past, communities have turned their back on the River, viewing it as an unsafe, unpleasant place that primarily functions to transport storm flows. Constrained by rail lines and freeways, the River has not been visually or physically accessible to most City residents. This Plan’s vision calls for transforming the River into a safe, accessible, healthy, green, and celebrated place, with the goal of making the River the focus of activity and helping to foster civic pride. For example, even industrial areas can be converted to new “eco-industrial” parks that improve the living and working environment by providing open space opportunities, access to the River, and cleaner, higher-paying jobs for City residents.

The goals for capturing community opportunities also include engaging residents in the community planning process. Neighborhood-by-neighborhood consensus building can help identify the best areas for reorienting development and open space while encouraging neighborhood enhancement, empowerment, and reinvestment. Complementary goals include providing opportunities for educational and public facilities, and celebrating the cultural heritage of the River.

4. CREATE VALUE
Creating value is the fourth organizing principle of the Plan. Core elements of this principle include the goal of improving the quality of life by increasing the attractiveness of the City and enhancing public health for both residents and visitors as a place to live, work, and visit. A related goal is the creation of environmentally-sensitive, sustainable urban design and land use guidelines, such as those encouraging “green buildings,” rooftop gardens, and the use of water quality BMPs in street and park design.

Value is also created by providing opportunities for new employment, housing, and retail space, such as galleries, service shops, restaurants, and cafés. An additional and significant goal includes focusing attention on underused areas and disadvantaged communities to ensure equitable opportunities for housing, parks, employment, and transportation connections in areas that are especially lacking in these amenities. Revitalization of the River can introduce a broad range of benefits that will enhance Los Angeles’ livability and result in greater economic prosperity for everyone.

The goals mentioned above and specific recommendations that will help realize the Plan’s vision are discussed in more detail in Chapters 4 through 7.
Imagine a new riverfront Community Park in Canoga Park along the Los Angeles River.
The four organizing principles and their supporting goals reflect important values that have been expressed by residents throughout the River Revitalization Master Plan process. Residents have articulated a strong desire for a "greener" Los Angeles that may be experienced by everyone. Key values shared in the public participation process are environmental responsibility, social and geographic equity, community engagement and support, designs that are based on sustainable economics, and a system-wide perspective toward the Los Angeles River watershed.

**Environmental Responsibility**

Environmental principles and values—such as restoring natural systems and remaking human environments—have exerted a strong influence on the Plan. The Los Angeles River is both a real and symbolic source of life for the City. As such, restoring the River’s environmental functions and making it the spine of a stronger green space system are integral to this planning effort.

Requirements for habitat, recreation, economic development, and water quality should be developed within the context of the needs expressed by individual neighborhoods.

**Social and Geographic Equity**

Opportunities should be funded in a socially and geographically-equitable manner. Environmental justice—ensuring that areas with lower-income populations receive opportunities consistent with higher-income areas—has been a major consideration in developing this Plan and should continue to be a priority in its implementation.

**Community Engagement**

The revitalization of the River cannot occur without widespread community support. This Plan was developed by and for the residents of the City, and requires their support to be effectively implemented. The Plan has received widespread support at numerous public workshops conducted throughout the River Corridor over 18 months. Now, as implementation begins, residents will be asked to participate in the community planning process to identify the types of land, recreation, and open space uses that are appropriate for and compatible with each neighborhood.

The City is fortunate to have strong support for River revitalization at every level of government. As initial projects progress, it is essential that this support be sustained. City staff and resources will continue to be leveraged to ensure a lasting commitment to River revitalization.

**Sustainable Economics**

Efforts are underway throughout the watershed to provide funding for water-quality compliance activities, ecosystem restoration, community reinvestment, transportation improvements, and recreational amenities. Lessons from other cities that have revitalized their riverfronts show that changes of the type recommended here require private investment and initiative. Design standards and guidelines for development within the proposed River Improvement Overlay (RIO) will be established to support the Plan, so that reinvestment may occur in an environmentally-sensitive and sustainable manner.

**A System-Wide Perspective**

Efforts to improve environmental conditions within the watersheds of the City and County of Los Angeles have spanned decades. While this Plan complements and reinforces these efforts, it is important to realize that it alone cannot solve all of the watershed’s problems. Since the context for the Plan is the River Corridor within the City of Los Angeles, it is beyond the scope of the Plan to provide detailed solutions to watershed-wide issues, such as water quality, habitat values, densification, industrial land use, and affordable housing. The Plan addresses these issues within the context of the River Corridor, and makes recommendations when linkages exist to other planning efforts, such as those for water quality, habitat corridors, and flow reduction. The proposed 3-tiered River management structure can enable longer-term collaboration that would foster a broader dialogue and more regional benefits.

VALUES SHAPING THE PLAN

Top - Major General Ronald L. Johnson, with Councilmember Tom LaBonge, meets with top City, County, and Corps of Engineers dignitaries in support of the Corps’ ongoing involvement in restoring the Los Angeles River. (First Council District, September 2005)

Middle - Mayor Antonio Villaraigosa and Councilmember Ed Reyes call for public participation in the Los Angeles River Revitalization Master Plan during a press conference at the Cornfield, the site of the Los Angeles Historic State Park. (First Council District, September 2005)

Bottom - Senator Barbara Boxer, joined by City and State dignitaries, announces a bill to secure nearly $80 million for the Los Angeles River revitalization during a press conference at Taylor Yard, the site of the Los Angeles River Revitalization Master Plan during a press conference at the Cornfield, the site of the Los Angeles Historic State Park. (First Council District, September 2005)
Imagine a boatable secondary Los Angeles River channel.
A RIVER, TRANSFORMED: THE BENEFITS OF REINVESTMENT

PRECEDENTS FROM OTHER CITIES

Many cities across the country have reinvested in their rivers, reaping benefits that go well beyond economic returns. The San Antonio Riverwalk, in Texas, is perhaps the earliest and most well-known, but many other cities, large and small—among them, San Jose, California; Houston, Texas; Chattanooga and Memphis, Tennessee; and Washington, DC—have transformed their rivers into assets for their communities. These projects have invigorated tourism, created a better quality of life for residents, and helped produce vibrant economies.

Some communities, such as Chicago, Milwaukee, and Portland, not only have invested in their rivers, but in a larger “green agenda” featuring a more substantial street tree canopy, enhanced public open space that cleans storm runoff, and “green street” connections that link neighborhoods to green space and riverfronts throughout the city. These communities have emerged as extremely desirable places to live and work, with the amount of “green” factoring prominently in where people choose to live or locate businesses.

Los Angeles can build on the precedents established by these other cities. The vision set forth in this Plan, when coupled with ongoing efforts such as the County’s 1996 Los Angeles River Master Plan, the greater Los Angeles Integrated Regional Water Management Plan, and the City’s Million Trees Initiative, can propel the City’s own “green agenda” and make Los Angeles a better place in which to live.

MULTIPLE BENEFITS AT MANY LEVELS

The benefits that result from other cities’ major river investments accrue on several levels. These include the following:

- **For residents**, more parks and “greener” riverfronts with restored ecological functions and “green street” connections that get people safely from home to school to the park and to the river’s edge;

- **For neighborhoods**, both along the River and outside its area of influence, a greater sense of community identity and pride, recreational and economic opportunities, including more parks and open space, and potentially more stable neighborhoods as residents make comparable investments in their own properties and businesses;

- **For the City as a whole**, ways to comply with environmental regulatory requirements for water quality in the River and its tributaries, thus avoiding potentially-costly fines, while providing needed additional jobs and housing, increased attractiveness to visitors, increased tax revenues, and ways to move around in the City that do not involve a car;

- **At the federal level**, in light of the River’s past flood history, benefits would be achieved through flood-damage reduction, ecosystem restoration, and environmental improvements through wildlife habitat and water quality features.