The Taylor Yard Opportunity Area to the east of the River and Elysian Park. (2006)
A COMMUNITY PLANNING FRAMEWORK FOR REVITALIZATION

This chapter considers the community planning framework in which River revitalization will take place, and describes a proposed River Improvement Overlay (RIO).

Implementation of this Revitalization Plan will take place within the existing City planning and zoning context. It is anticipated that an important next step, following adoption of this Plan, will be to update existing Community Plans in areas that include the River, through an inclusive community involvement process. These Community Plans are the appropriate places to develop and document more refined proposals for River improvements. Zoning changes may also follow these Plan updates.

To complement the Community Plan process, a River Improvement Overlay (RIO) district would be created, with three important functions:

- Promote the sustainability of the Los Angeles River, its Greenway, the City of Los Angeles and the Region.
- Development should establish a positive interface with the River and create new open space opportunities within the River Greenway, thereby integrating the River into the daily life of the City.
- Blocks around the River should be developed to promote pedestrian, bicycle, and other nonmotorized transportation connections to the River and thereby extend the City to and across the River.
COMMUNITY PLANNING FRAMEWORK

PLANNING AND ZONING CONTEXT

Today’s efforts to revitalize the River seek to reverse decades of neglect and disregard. The River’s role as the “soul” and “center” of the City disappeared over a century ago. In the intervening years the River was channelized, fenced off and largely ignored. Residential, commercial, and industrial buildings that abutted the River now obscure it from view. Places where there used to be public access to the River are now gone—lost behind locked gates. As often occurs with places that are neglected, illegal activities began to occur which only furthered people’s disregard for the River—contributing to a perception of the River as ugly and unsafe.

Revitalizing the Los Angeles River will bring a new level of connectivity, amenity and value to many neighborhoods along the River. In most existing neighborhoods the River has been a blighting influence on land use, and a barrier between neighborhoods. In many areas the River-side of the neighborhood is blighted with parking, storage and freight activities. Many residents who live near the River have expressed concerns for security along the River, as there is both real and perceived crime in some areas.

The economics of land use in Los Angeles have been highly skewed by the price of housing in recent years. As a result, property values have risen dramatically in most areas. In particular, there has been heavy pressure on some of the commercial and industrial areas to transform. Many areas of industry along the River and near downtown have been changing due to a combination of business improvements and land use conversions into residential uses. This trend has been a significant concern for two reasons: 1) land use pressure is increasing costs in a way that pushes long-term residents out of neighborhoods in favor of higher land-value uses (gentrification) and 2) land use pressure has raised land values and rents to levels that make it difficult or undesirable for existing industries to stay.

Revitalizing the River could potentially add to these pressures. In general, the commercial and industrial areas along the River are very low on amenities and are disconnected from their surroundings. This very isolation is part of why the areas have become industrial. With greening of the River and new connections being established, these areas are likely to become even more attractive for conversion into mixed-use and residential areas.

As one of the next steps towards remedying the City’s relationship with the River, the Los Angeles River Revitalization Master Plan recommends that the Department of City Planning initiate updates of the twelve Community Plans that are within a one-half mile proximity to the River, initiate a Specific Plan for the Chinatown-Cornfields Opportunity Area and possibly for the Canoga Park Opportunity Area, implement a River Improvement Overlay (RIO) district, and develop new “Green Street” segments for the Arterial (Major Class Highway II and Secondary Highway) and Local (Neighborhood and Industrial) Streets in conjunction with the development of the City’s General Plan Mobility Element that will be undertaken in 2007 to replace the Transportation Element.

This Plan will set policy and goals for the River, providing guidance into the mid-century. As a result of the Plan, the City will need to reconsider the zoning along the River and in the neighborhoods surrounding it. There is concern that the current zoning, in some places, does not support the goals and vision of River revitalization. As a pivotal component of the revitalization process, it is important that zoning promotes new development that embraces the River and encourages economic development activities in appropriate places.

The steps to modify current zoning involve a lengthy legal and community participation process. The City has several tools that can be used to change and/or modify a zone. A developer or property owner can request that a zone be changed for a specific property. Unfortunately, this individual and “piecemeal” process can result in uses being placed next to each other that are not compatible and that do not support the community’s vision. There are other planning tools that are better suited to the River’s goals. One is the Specific Plan and another is the Community Plan. The City’s 35 Community Plans together comprise the Land Use Element of the City’s General Plan. These must be considered in implementing the Revitalization Master Plan’s proposals.
COMMUNITY PLAN UPDATES

GENERAL PLANS
The Department of City Planning is charged with the responsibility of preparing, maintaining and implementing the General Plan for the development of the City. The General Plan consists of the Framework Element, which provides overall guidance for the future of the City, as well as various other Citywide elements, including the state-mandated elements, such as those for Transportation (to be replaced by the Mobility Element), Open Space, and Land Use (among others). The Land Use element defines a range of allowable land uses and intensities of uses as well as other matters relating to the use of land unique to each of the City’s many communities.

The General Plan is implemented utilizing a variety of tools, mainly through the application of zoning regulations and the division of land into separate parcels. Traditional zoning designations, Specific Plans, overlay districts, special use permits, such as those for conditional uses, and a variety of other instruments all regulate the use of land. The zoning portion of the Municipal Code, Specific Plans and other regulatory tools establish development standards applicable to matters such as the heights of structures, setbacks, lot coverage, open space, parking, and design. Those seeking relief from the strict application of these regulations, apply to the Department of City Planning, which can grant relief from the requirements, when justified, through the use of variances or other similar tools tailored for specific purposes.

COMMUNITY PLANS
Community involvement and input is a critical component of any project or process that proposes neighborhood-focused and/or city wide changes. For example, in the case of a private development project that seeks to amend the existing zoning code, neighbors are notified and invited to comment and attend a public hearing prior to a decision being made.

In the case of a Community Plan update, the City has developed a formal process for including public participation. This same process would be used for the creation of a new Specific Plan, or Community Design Overlay District (See page 8-7, which discusses the River Improvement Overlay [RIO].) These processes would include a review of all existing pertinent documents as well as conversations with stakeholders to identify key issues and opportunities. The City’s planners conduct public workshops to solicit direct input on the draft document. An open house and public hearing provide additional opportunities for the community to provide formal comments on plans before they are approved and adopted.

Community Plans are updated approximately once every ten years but there are often circumstances which require that they be amended in the interim. This amendment may be triggered by the community, Council office, Planning Department, and/or Mayor. An amendment might include a zone change, a new street designation, or a new affordable housing requirement. In these circumstances, a similar public participation process would be used. City planners would gather information, listen to stakeholders, identify issues, hold public workshops, and conduct an open house with a public hearing.

The public participation process in the case of a public project, such as a new park, school, or bridge, is similar to the examples described above. The involvement of the community and their local knowledge, in decisions that will affect them, is paramount to the success of any project.

SPECIFIC PLANS
A Specific Plan is a regulatory land use tool designated by ordinance. It is a “mini” Community Plan of sorts, although there are many differences. A Community Plan encompasses many square miles and sometimes dozens of different neighborhoods, but a Specific Plan is usually much smaller and is usually written for a specific neighborhood or area. The Specific Plan, like the Community Plan, involves much public discussion. A Specific Plan can change zoning, write a new zone and impose additional design guidelines. The Specific Plan must be compatible with the Community it intersects and therefore a Community Plan is often amended concurrent with the adoption of the Specific Plan.

Because it will take many years for the City to update all of the Community Plans along the River, it may be beneficial to prioritize updates in certain places where there is immediate concern or interest to encourage economic development. This may be accomplished with a Specific Plan. The Revitalization Master Plan recommends that a Specific Plan be initiated, within six months after the Plan’s adoption, for the Chinatown-Comfields Opportunity Area. The Specific Plan may take up to two years to complete.
Existing Community Plan - Land Use Designation

Legend
- Single Family Residential
- Multiple Family Residential
- Commercial
- Industrial
- Agricultural
- Open Space
- Public Facilities
- Limit of Geographical Data Set

Plan information provided by the City of Los Angeles Department of City Planning
Many of the Plan’s goals can be accomplished quickly, without changing the zoning (land use, building heights, densities, or parking requirements). Through the many community workshops that have been held over the past 18 months, participants have stressed the importance that new River developments adopt changes in their design approach, such as building orientation, parking location, landscape design, and stormwater mitigation. As a result of these conversations, the Plan recommends that the Department of City Planning follow the Plan’s adoption with the creation of a River Improvement Overlay (RIO) district. The RIO is a Community Design Overlay District which would ensure that development near the River provides for the realization of the goals of the Plan.

The RIO’s boundary will be determined with input from the community—it is expected that the boundary would be widened or narrowed in different areas depending upon expressed public sentiments. It is further recommended that the RIO establish an initial design review procedure whereby the Department of City Planning’s River Unit would determine if a project substantially complies with the standards and guidelines set forth in the RIO.

The standards and guidelines of the RIO would be written to meet three goals that reflect the overall philosophy and vision of the Plan. Each of these goals is supported by objectives that further reinforce the Plan.

Goal 1: Promote the sustainability of the Los Angeles River, its Greenway, the City of Los Angeles and the Region.

Objectives:
- Encourage sustainable design approaches for building within the RIO.
- Encourage landscaping and landscape maintenance practices that conserve water to the greatest extent possible.
- Encourage natural drainage functions: allow water to percolate underground to replenish aquifers, filter out suspended solids, remove pollutants and slow down flows through vegetation, where appropriate.
- Design to minimize environmental impacts on air and water quality and to protect scarce resources.
- Contribute to a sustainable means of living for families of diverse income levels.
- Increase public open space.
Goal 2: Development should establish a positive interface with the River and create new open space opportunities within the River Greenway, thereby integrating the River into the daily life of the City.

Objectives:
- Provide public connections between the River Greenway and adjacent properties.
- Provide and enhance public connections to the River Greenway from neighboring streets.
- Enhance and protect views of the City, River, mountains and other scenic opportunities from and through new development thereby expanding the River's reach into the City.
- Create River Greenway-adjacent open spaces that enhance the natural qualities and open space character of the River.
- Provide views into and out of the buildings, courtyards, passages, and entries to allow pedestrians, bicyclists and other users to enjoy a level of safety and security consistent with the well-accepted "eyes on the street" philosophy.
- Provide adequate site lighting to ensure a safe and enjoyable nighttime recreational environment for the public, while minimizing local light pollution.
- Create a sense of the human scale in design elements.
- Add visual interest by providing rich and interesting façades, including variation in height, massing, rhythm, and/or texture.
- Protect and enhance the aesthetic characteristics of the improved River Greenway.
- Provide signage that communicates wayfinding information to users of the River Greenway.
- Provide a balance of shade and shadow on the River Greenway to enhance public enjoyment.

Goal 3: Blocks around the River should be developed to promote pedestrian, bicycle, and other nonmotorized transportation connections to the River and thereby extend the City to and across the River.

Objectives:
- Provide public connections between streets and front doors.
- Provide and enhance public connections to the River Greenway from streets.
- Prevent automobile-pedestrian and other intermodal conflicts.
- Maintain continuity of sidewalks.
- Maintain continuity of street walls on commercial corridors.
- Enhance and protect views of the City, River, mountains and other scenic opportunities from and through new development thereby expanding the River's reach into the City.
- Provide views into and out of the buildings, courtyards, passages, and entries to allow pedestrians, bicyclists and other users to enjoy a level of safety and security consistent with the well-accepted "eyes on the street" philosophy.
- Provide adequate site lighting to ensure a safe and enjoyable nighttime environment for the public, while minimizing local light pollution.
- Create a sense of human scale in design elements.
- Add visual interest by providing a rich and interesting façade, including variation in height, massing, rhythm, and/or texture.
- Provide signage that communicates wayfinding information to users within the RIO area.
- Provide a balance of shade and shadow to enhance public enjoyment of streets.
Finally, the Plan recommends that the Departments of City Planning, Street Services, Engineering, and Transportation develop Green Street standards for the pedestrian segments of the Major Highways (Class II), Secondary Highways and Local Streets (neighborhood and industrial), concurrent with its 2007 update of the Transportation Element that will be renamed the Mobility Element. The purpose of this Element is to present a guide for the future development of a citywide transportation system, which provides for the efficient movement of people and goods. The updated Mobility Element will place emphasis on the importance of developing a multimodal transportation infrastructure that accommodates the needs of pedestrians, bicyclists, other nonmotorized transportation users, passenger vehicles, and freight carriers. This holistic approach to transportation is consistent with this Plan’s promotion of Green Streets. The Green Street standards can then be applied to the appropriate River-adjacent streets.

A proposed Green Street near the Taylor Yard Opportunity Area provides safe access between the River and the Rio de los Angeles State Park.

A proposed Green Street in the Canoga Park Opportunity Area connects a local middle school to the Los Angeles River.