



Los Angeles River Master Plan & Green Gentrification

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Introduction & Background

The Los Angeles (LA) River is 51 miles long (Figure 1) and flows through 13 different cities from Reseda to Long Beach. The County of Los Angeles created a Master Plan for the LA River development and revitalization to the river. It developed nine main plan goals based on community needs. One of these goals is to “address potential adverse impacts to housing affordability and people experiencing homelessness” (County of Los Angeles 2021).

This goal addresses Agyeman’s (2013) condition of a just and sustainable community by “meeting the needs of both present and future generations”. Although the plan contains research of possible displacement of at-risk residents, it does not strongly address the risk of gentrification, including the future displacement of residents, and how to prevent it. (insert visuals of Goal 6 action plan)

Based on research by Németh and Rigolon (2019), gentrification would be triggered in neighborhoods of park development closer to downtowns. The LA River runs through many low-income neighborhoods which are close to downtown, both Los Angeles and Long Beach. Professionals (Christenson 2018) and the general public (Stodola 2017) have witnessed gentrification and can predict neighborhoods surrounding the LA River will do the same. Scholars (Németh and Rigolon 2019), refer to this process as green gentrification, also termed environmental gentrification. Green gentrification is defined as gentrification effects associated with greening projects. Aboelata, et al (2017) discusses how investments in “healthy community interventions” such as parks, are intended to improve the health of local residents (under resource, low-income communities of color) but over time attract more development and affluent people to move into these neighborhoods. This process violates the aspects of just sustainability with main concerns of affordable housing for low-income residents and local resident displacement.



Figure 1: County of Los Angeles, Master Plan Fact Sheet. 2021.

Methods

This research evaluates the Los Angeles River Master Plan for the ways it addresses housing affordability concerns. First, I analyzed the plan for areas that addressed housing concerns and it planned to take action for those concerns. Next, I reviewed Community Meetings presentations and Recaps held from 2018-2019 throughout communities along the Los Angeles River. I studied the comments and input made by residents from public meetings held by those creating the master plan to understand if affordable housing and gentrification concerns were an issue. I then compare public comments on areas of housing affordability with the Master Plan to see if it addresses areas of concern. I also reviewed the plan and public comment to see if concerns on “Green Gentrification” are addressed as mentioned in studies by Nemeth et al (2019) and Aboelata et al (2017).

Results

The Los Angeles River Master Plan consist of nine goals. The visual in Figure 2 was shown during public outreach and community meetings. As shown, the goal to “Address potential adverse impacts to housing affordability and people experiencing homelessness” is a goal that is visually equal to all the other goals.



Figure 2: County of Los Angeles, Master Plan Fact Sheet. 2021.

Each of the nine goals has action plans. For the purpose of this poster, Goal 6 will be focused on as it relates directly to gentrification, including housing displacement and homelessness. (Table 1)

Goal 6: Address Potential Adverse Impacts to Housing Affordability and People Experiencing Homelessness

Action	Description
6.1	Utilize the County's Affordable Housing Coordinating Committee to review and advise on housing and community stabilization strategies along the river.
6.2	Develop mapping and assessment planning tools to identify areas at risk for displacement around the LA River in order to prioritize affordable housing projects.
6.3	Increase units of affordable housing within one mile of the river.
6.4	Identify funding necessary to create an affordable housing land bank, land acquisition loan fund, or similar strategy to purchase land in proximity to the river and hold it for future development as affordable housing or permanent supportive housing.
6.5	Secure funding for affordable housing in parallel with funding for river projects.
6.6	Incentivize stronger resident equity building tools and tenant protection policies along the river.
6.7	Support persons experiencing homelessness along the river by coordinating outreach and by building new permanent supportive housing.
6.8	Integrate best practices for working with persons experiencing homelessness utilizing the river corridor.

Table 1: County of Los Angeles, Los Angeles River Master Plan Draft. 2021

Analysis of the LA River Master Plan addressed areas of housing affordability with specific action plans. Six out of eight actions items are geared towards housing affordability and prevention of housing displacement. The other two actions are geared towards homelessness.

There were a total of twelve community meetings held from 2018-2019 throughout communities along the Los Angeles River. At each meeting, a presentation was made. Each presentation was similar in information with the only changes occurring in photos included from previous meetings to show participation.

Review of the comment and input at community meetings showed little to no responses in regards to housing affordability. I found this surprising as there is supporting research and real life examples of park/recreation development associated with gentrification (green gentrification). The research by Németh et al (2019) had findings show that the size of parks did not activate gentrification activities, but the function of parks did. According to the community presentations, much focus was on the design of improvements and how it would provide “equitable, inclusive, and safe parks, open space, and trails”. These active park functions are aspects that can lead to gentrification. Aboelata et al (2017) also discuss how development towards healthy communities can lead to gentrification and displacement.

I took it a step further and analyzed why there were little to no responses in public participation. I reviewed comments for meetings 9-13 which included the cities of Pacoima, Glendale, Canoga Park, North Long Beach, and Central Los Angeles. Out of the 50+ slides of the presentation, only 2 briefly

mentioned any housing issues in images like Figure 2. Most discussion was on questions created by the creators of the Master Plan. Homelessness was discussed but only on areas of “safety” related questions. One slide also briefly showed “affordable housing development locations” but no description of what that meant. Two meetings ranked areas of importance (similar to the Plan Goals) and housing affordability ranked at the low end of the ranking (8/9 during the Pacoima meeting and 7/9 at the Glendale meeting).

Discussion

I conclude that the lack of importance around housing affordability and displacement is because very little to no discussion was made in the presentations. There was also a lack of participation from communities who could be directly affected. During the Central LA meeting, one resident stated “the lack of actual community present [from] Boyle Heights is disappointing”. On the other hand, homelessness was a high priority issue when it came to safety. Again, the presentation only mentioned homelessness as a safety issue versus supporting people experiencing homelessness (Action 6.7). No mention of best practices or outreach was discussed on how best to handle the current homelessness issue (Action 6.8). Overall, if no discussion or slide on specific issues of housing affordability or displacement is discussed with the public, it will not be recognized as an important issue. Also, without the direct community residents who would be directly affected at the meeting, there would be no input.

I recommend to continue community outreach but to include education on the possibility of housing displacement based off of “green gentrification” research. Aboelata et al (2017) discussed displacement prevention strategies (Figure 3) that describes and includes policy influences, organizational changes, coalition building, provider education, community education promotion and individual knowledge education. Based on my findings, more emphasis needs to be made on promoting community education on the aspects of gentrification and how the improvement of the Los Angeles could affect them as residents. By strengthening the community with this knowledge, a stronger participation should result.



Figure 3: Strategies (Aboelata, et al)

Conclusion/Policy Recommendation

The LA River Master Plan draft has areas of public comment to be entered by page number. I find it difficult to address my concerns regarding public education page by page but would like to make recommendation by Goals. Goal 6 itself does address areas of prevention of “green gentrification” but does not emphasize strategies for educating the public before the plan becomes finalized.

The Plan Goal 7, “Foster opportunities for continued community engagement, development, and education”, needs to be held at a priority to comply with aspects of just sustainability. It needs to directly address the areas of prevention of green gentrification. For this section, my recommendation is to:

- Provide equitable education on each of the Plan goals, especially the issue of housing affordability and housing displacement as a result of “Green Gentrification”.
- Provide community participation questions that are not framed in a way to illicit responses. (e.g. Supporting people experiencing homelessness versus a safety issue)
- Ensure actual communities affected by any improvement and development of the Los Angeles River are present during presentations and in engagement/input/surveys.

With equitable public education and involvement with those who will be directly affected, will ensure that housing affordability will be a priority to the low-income residents along the Los Angeles River.

For more information

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