

LA River Revitalization & Green Gentrification

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Introduction & Background

With the increasingly detrimental effects of the global climate crisis, reducing flood risk is becoming more pressing as the frequency and intensity of extreme storms compromise the liveability of the LA basin (LA River Master Plan 2020). In new sustainability efforts, California environmental organizations such as the Natural Resources Defense Council have been advocating for restoration to the river's natural state in order to provide surrounding communities with parks, trails, recreation, neighborhood identity, community development, and civic pride.

The threat that revitalization will uproot LA natives from their homes are at the forefront of limitations to the plan, as private equity firms like Pan Am Equities are attempting to monetize the decades-long public endeavor in private profits (Nagami 2019). Their private housing project, Casitas Lofts, would create 384 market-rate units with only 35 to be guaranteed as affordable for low-income families. In the midst of the Southern California housing-shortage crisis, plans like these do not belong in the process of a public goods undertaking.

Revitalization of the river will not only restore the ecosystem of the region but will revamp stormwater and watershed management processes in capturing, collecting, treating, and using rainwater closer to where it falls before it can reach the river—aiding in flood prevention and improving local water supply. Our primary research question is: How can river revitalization improve the LA basin's ecosystem function without compromising equitable housing?



Figure 1. Chavez Ravine evictions, 1959. Los Angeles Times Photographic Archive.

Fears of "green gentrification" have come to the surface as current residents view the River revitalization as reminiscent of past wrongs committed by local government officials during the late-1950s when Chavez Ravine was turned into Dodger Stadium, and the historically marginalized Latinx community were not only red-lined when they purchased their properties, but eventually forcibly evicted from their homes (see Figure 1). In her 2018 study, Esther G. Kim's ethnographic fieldwork while living in the LA neighborhood of Frogtown, formally called Elysian Valley, revealed that residents and community stakeholders are rallying behind a place-based collective identity grounded in history and memories from the region's past in order to politicize this history and exert control over their livelihoods and environment within the process of revitalization.

Because the LA River route includes over 2,300 acres of primarily publicly owned land, and reparations from the event were never addressed, there is a huge opportunity for the LA River revitalization to mark the beginning of an aim to uplift the disenfranchised communities that have this collective lived experience. In order for the River to function sustainably while meeting the needs of current and future generations of Los Angeles, local municipal law and agency must be created to enforce displacement policies. As *Friends of the LA River* founder, Lewis McAdams, underscored, "Until there is a Los Angeles River authority that has overall control of the river, not just for flood control, we'll never have the political control that is necessary."

Methods

The data used in the analysis was derived from public comment records at community meetings which were conducted by LA County officials and consultants. Analysis was emphasized in park-poor neighborhoods such as North Long Beach and Canoga Park versus affluent Glendale neighborhoods which have a regional park system. In efforts to keep constituents engaged, surveys over social media websites such as Twitter and Facebook were also conducted.

Results

Public Concerns:

Several organizations and residents have concerns that the revitalization of the LA River will cause Green Gentrification in cities along the 51-mile stretch. It was found that within the public comment time frame, the top two concerns regarding the project were the following:

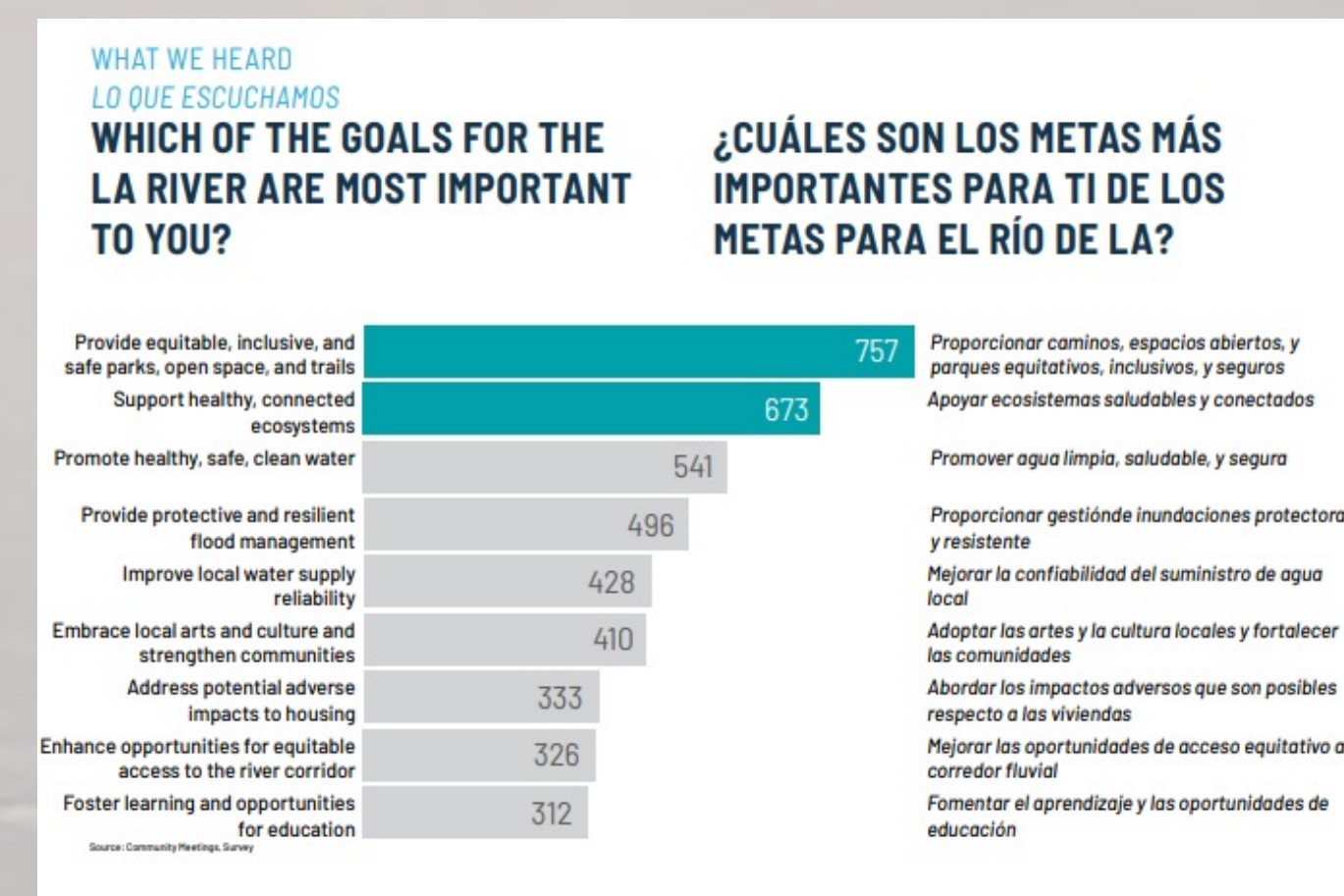
1. **Providing safe and equitable inclusion to parks and open spaces**
2. **Support for healthy and connected ecosystems**

Unfortunately, a concern for affordable housing or adverse effects to housing were seventh on the list. Table 1 demonstrates the number of votes that each concerned received during the public engagement periods.

Public comments from different community meetings along the LA River were analyzed and demonstrate that housing equity is not the top priority for most cities with the exception of Canoga Park. In the first public meeting held on July 2018 in Canoga park, attendees voiced their top concerns as being:

1. **Homelessness**
2. **Affordable Housing**
3. **Protection of animal and plant species**

Table 1. Public ranks what they find most important about the Project's goals. (LA River Master Plan 2020).



Additionally, residents and visitors of the LA River highlight that safety concerns are a major reason for them not visiting the river as often. The most prominent cause is the abundance of homeless residents in and around the river. Table 2 highlights what keeps residents from visiting the LA River.

Table 2. Visitors state the top reasons why they don't go to the river. (LA River Master Plan 2020).



The Need for Affordable Housing:

While homelessness is not directly viewed as a sign of gentrification, affordable housing loss is still seen as a potential outcome of the project which can further exacerbate homelessness. To mitigate adverse effects, Goal 6 of the LA River Master Plan (LARMP) highlighted areas at high risk of displacement such as DTLA, Bell Gardens, and North Long Beach.

The Master plan seeks funding to increase the affordable housing bank or to acquire land for future housing projects. Though not directly involved with the LARMP, County Supervisor Hilda Solis, has proposed a motion which aims to include low-income (referred to as non-chapter 8) properties in the affordable housing program. In total, the legislation increases funding to \$14,000,000 and ensures that affordable housing is maintained for a term of 99 years (Solis 2020).

Discussion

While renovation and investment in local environmental restoration may seem appealing and wholesome, the issue of "green gentrification" and its adverse impacts on affordable housing are far less of an interest for participants of community meetings hosted by the Public Works office. For example, the community recap for the Glendale community surveyed participants with their main concerns for the project:

- Only 7% stated that the impacts on housing prices were their main concern compared to ¼ of respondents who focused on the park and recreation aspect of the master plan.
- In a meeting held in North Long Beach, a similar margin is observed, with only 7.78% of respondents focused on displacement and housing price increase.

However, the measure of importance from respondents of these meeting may not reflect the focus on the entirety of River communities. There may be an implicit bias of home owners attending the meetings at a higher rate than renters.

According The Los Angeles Times county-wide dataset *Mapping L.A.*, which is compiled of schools, income, demographics, and news from Los Angeles County neighborhoods:

- The highest rate of renters in river-side communities is 82.6% of residents in the City of Cudahy.
- Across the river The City of Bell Gardens takes second place at 72.6% of renter-residents.
- The highest rate of home-ownership in in the project's focus is the Unincorporated Community of Rancho Dominguez at 86.8%.

The high concentration of renters in these communities make their demographic exceptionally susceptible to displacement through gentrification. However, this issue has been mostly overlooked by participants in the County's community outreach for the River Project.

Another factor to consider is the geographical distribution of the housing units and residential areas along the River's path. The need for affordable housing along the river is demonstrated by the concentrations of low-income neighbourhoods on either bank. After Mile 28 in Glendale, communities along the River including Downtown Los Angeles, Bell, Bell Gardens, and Long Beach constitute a very high housing affordability need. Most of the housing units above mile 28 consist of moderate to high income single family homes.

While the Los Angeles River may not have such hazardous status, it still has a cultural connotation with being dirty, polluted, and rife with chemicals. Development to rectify this issue will lead to more private development along its banks. While the Master Plan may not displace those residing on the riverbank directly, the renter's instability of housing expense can mean that a mere rent increase from the property owner will.

Conclusions/Policy Recommendations

In order to ensure that the Los Angeles River Revitalization Plan meets the needs of current residents both ecologically and economically, the threat to low-income community members must be addressed by the LA County Board of Commissioners. With anti-displacement policies and community stakeholders involved in the execution of the plan, local municipal law and agency must be created to enforce the anti-green gentrification policies mentioned in the LA River Master Plan, including:

- Utilize the County's Affordable Housing Coordinating Committee to implement rent control policies and expand low-income housing programs
- Allocate LA County 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 designate it as affordable housing
- Develop mapping and assessment planning tools to identify areas at risk for displacement around the LA River in order to prioritize affordable housing projects

Without local municipal governing authorities proactively seeking to inhibit displacement of high-risk families, private developers will continue to spur the rising inequality in California's housing market by seeking profits over sustainability in a time when natural disasters caused by the global climate crisis hamper the livability of the Golden State we love and call home.

For more information

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