

## Costly L.A. River plan contains a raft of new ideas

Proposed \$2-billion makeover of the ugly concrete waterway calls for a string of parks, housing and offices.

By Steve Hymon, Times Staff Writer  
February 2, 2007



[PHOTO GALLERY](#)

[River conceptualized](#)



GRAPHIC

[Changing the channel](#)

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### - [Key provisions of the Los Angeles River Revitalization Master Plan](#)

After decades of enduring jokes about the city's concrete-lined waterway, officials today will release an ambitious master plan for restoring the Los Angeles River, a project that reflects lofty dreams and carries a big price tag.

If anything, the plan is significant not for its specifics but for its sweep and boldness in proposing to turn the industrial-strength storm drain running from the San Fernando Valley to the sea into "one of the city's most treasured landmarks."

The Los Angeles River Revitalization Master Plan proposes a \$2-billion-plus makeover that would replace vast tracts of industrial land along the river with parks, clean up the river and make it appear more natural while retaining its important flood-control role.

The plan is intended to guide construction of a series of parks along 32 miles of the river from Canoga Park to downtown Los Angeles over 25 to 50 years.

Channeled decades ago to protect the city against periodic flooding, the river has provided an ugly contrast in a city known for the natural beauty of its setting. The waterway in recent years has attracted new interest from those who would like to blast away its walls and replace them with a semblance of a natural river.

Up to now, however, visions for doing so have been vague or piecemeal. The master plan offers the first comprehensive — and as yet unfunded — proposal for a restoration.

It consists of 239 projects, most of them small. Some, however, would be immense. In two places — Chinatown and Canoga Park — residential and office villages would rise along the river's newly greened banks, replacing factories and warehouses. The plan also envisions widening the river channel in some places to preserve its flood-control capacity while creating more riparian habitat.

Advocates say that the plan offers the possibility of constructing the kind of grand public gathering

places that have been in short supply in Los Angeles. The restoration's new parks would appear in many parts of the city, rich and poor, including downtown, which is undergoing a revival.

"All of these statements about it being impossible have been made before, and I listen to it and understand it," said Councilman Ed Reyes, the head of the council's river restoration committee. "But impossible? I don't believe it is."

### **'Wildly ambitious'**

Gail Goldberg, the city's planning chief, praised the plan for its scale. "These kind of plans are always long-term," she said. "And they need to be wildly ambitious to capture the public's attention and imagination. Urban design should be bold."

At this stage, the plan is largely hypothetical. Most of the money has not been secured. Beautifying the river could be a hard sell in a city that chronically struggles to hire more police, repair streets and sidewalks, and find funding for transportation improvements.

But the plan— drafted by the city, consultants and the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers at the behest of city officials — has growing political momentum on its side. Mayor Antonio Villaraigosa has said he is a supporter, and a majority of the City Council wants to see something happen.

Powerful and deadly floods in 1914, 1934 and 1938 prompted civic leaders to tame the river to protect the city growing on its floodplain. By the 1950s, most of the river had been encased in concrete, though some portions north of downtown and in the Sepulveda Basin still have a natural bed.

River restoration efforts have come into vogue for cities across United States in recent years as a way to bring parks into the urban core and reclaim nature. Los Angeles County has built several parks along the river's southern reaches over the last decade, and the nonprofit North East Trees and the Mountains Recreation and Conservation Authority have constructed a series of pocket parks along the river between downtown and Glendale.

City Engineer Gary Lee Moore said he believes that the plan will begin with relatively small projects designed to bring people closer to the river. Among those are the completion of a bike path connecting Chinatown and Griffith Park via the river's banks and new pedestrian bridges over it.

"We're talking about signature bridges — a bridge that people really want to see and that will allow them to see the river," Moore said.

The next phase would be to construct parks along the river while softening its edges with greenery. If that goes well, the city would move on to the biggest project of all: widening and deepening the river channel.

The idea is to preserve the river's current flood-control capacity while slowing its peak flows. Accomplishing that would allow more vegetation and wetlands to be created in the channel because the tamer current wouldn't wash them away.

The Corps of Engineers — the same agency that channeled the river between the 1930s and '50s — is in the early stages of a three-year, \$7.3-million study to determine what is technically possible.

"We're trying to find the best locations for potential ecosystem restoration, with an eye toward riparian habitat and aquatic species," said Col. Alex Dornstauder of the corps.

The city is contemplating tearing out concrete in a few places. Reyes and Moore said the site where the river most likely would be widened is next to the almost-finished Taylor Yard State Park next to Cypress Park.

There, a Union Pacific maintenance facility is between the river and the new park. The facility has seldom been used since 2003, and the city hopes to purchase it from the railroad. As for funding, the city is hoping that breaking the restoration effort into smaller pieces will enable it to tap into a variety of funding sources, including local, county and state water initiatives.

Others believe private funding will be essential, because federal and state money is in short supply. In Chicago, for example, residents and businesses contributed more than \$200 million to build a downtown park that opened in 2004.

"I think it's going to have to be a public-private partnership," said Shelly Backlar, executive director of the advocacy group Friends of the Los Angeles River. "And I think to rely specifically on governmental funds is going to take a long, long time."

The plan also proposes new agencies to oversee the project and offers several suggestions for cleaning up the river's poor water quality.

An element likely to draw controversy is a proposal to rezone river-adjacent property to encourage residential development to replace factories and warehouses.

## **Housing and offices**

The plan calls for nearly 6,200 residential units along the river in Canoga Park and 4,665 units near Chinatown. Both sites also would see new retail and office development.

It remains unclear how the plan will be received, although the good-sized crowds drawn to public meetings held across the city over the last two years indicated public interest.

Councilman Dennis Zine, who represents Canoga Park, is noncommittal at this point. Councilman Tom LaBonge said he is reluctant to lose industry — and jobs — in his district, close to downtown.

Council President Eric Garcetti said residents near the waterway want it restored.

"If you want to represent these areas near the river, you have to be for this," he said.

Driving through the warehouse and factory district along Main Street in Chinatown, Reyes motioned toward the buildings and predicted that one day many will be replaced with a more campus-like city near the river.

"You won't even recognize it," he said.

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*(INFOBOX BELOW)*

*Key provisions*

*Some elements of the Los Angeles River Revitalization Master Plan*

**Governance:** *The plan calls for three new agencies to guide river restoration. One would be a joint powers authority of city and county officials to oversee construction while the other two would be nonprofits that focus on managing the land and fundraising.*

**Water quality:** *Several solutions are posed to help clean polluted water that spills into the river from 2,200 storm drains. Most proposals would rely on filtering the water through new vegetation before it reaches the river.*

**Location:** *Many projects are targeted for one of five areas determined last year: the river's headwaters in Canoga Park; the confluence of the river and the Verdugo Wash near Griffith Park; the new Taylor Yard State Park next to Cypress Park; Chinatown; and the river between the Santa Ana and Santa Monica freeways.*

*Source: Los Angeles River Revitalization Master Plan*