

Fervor flowing as L.A. looks to revive river

Updated 4/17/2006 5:42 AM ET

By Martin Kasindorf, USA TODAY

LOS ANGELES * The historic river that gave birth to this city is flickering back to life after decades as an open storm drain encased in concrete and littered with trash.

Inspired by river renaissances in cities from Providence to San Antonio, beach-oriented Los Angeles is rediscovering the inland Los Angeles River with the fervor of the Mexican farmers who founded the city on its banks in 1781. The 51-mile waterway, newly celebrated in poems, books and art exhibits, is the focus of a 20-year master plan for restoration that the city will release next January.

Angelenos at a series of 18 neighborhood meetings are suggesting ways to turn an ugly flood-control channel into a civic joy. Visions for greening the riverway include terracing and planting trees on the concrete walls, creating an inner-city beach for the East Los Angeles barrio and opening restaurants like those on the San Antonio River Walk that anchor the Texas city's \$1.2 billion-a-year tourism industry.

Transforming the landscape

"Reinventing the river will transform the urban landscape of Los Angeles," says Arthur Golding, an architect and river-improvement advocate. "Nobody's talking of restoring the river to pre-European-settlement times. But I think a lot of concrete can come out."

The river was Los Angeles' main water supply until the city opened a 233-mile aqueduct from the Sierra Nevada in 1913. No longer a necessity, the river was seen as a nuisance * dry nine months of the year and prone to flooding in the winter rainy season.

After a flood in 1938 took 87 lives, the city petitioned Congress to tame the river. By 1960, the Army Corps of Engineers had straitjacketed the river between walls that funnel winter storm runoff from the area's mountains to the ocean at Long Beach.

The once-powerful river has been "walled up, fenced off, locked away from human eyes like a loony aunt hidden in the attic," author Patt Morrison wrote in 2002 in *Rio L.A.*, a best seller here. "Most people who live here don't realize we have a river," Golding says.

The river bottom is paved except for three stretches that total 11 miles. Railroad tracks line both banks for 4 1/2 miles through downtown Los Angeles, barring public access.

When the riverbed is dry, Hollywood loves filming car chases and shootouts there. The bleak setting has been featured in more than 20 movies, including *Chinatown*, *Grease* and *Terminator 2: Judgment Day*. Flows of treated sewage water partly fill the river in most of the dry season.

Artists were first to see beauty beneath the river's soiled face. In 1986, poet Lewis MacAdams and others founded Friends of the Los Angeles River, an environmental group that fields 3,500 volunteers one day every May to remove 30 tons of trash. Artist Leo Limón has been painting cat faces on the river's storm drain covers for 25 years.

Revived interest spurred Los Angeles County in 1996 to draft a long-term plan for improving the riverway. Under that blueprint, \$110 million has been spent on "vest pocket" parks and bike paths, mostly in smaller cities downriver.

Now it's Los Angeles' turn. The nation's second-most-populous city is mapping improvements along the 32 miles of the river within the city. City Council member Ed Reyes, 47, an urban planner by profession, grew up near the river and heads the council's committee on fixing the waterway * reviving nature, creating jobs and bringing open space to a city he calls "park-poor."

Scouting sites

Consulting engineers and landscape architects are narrowing in on five sites that could form a nucleus for parks, housing and entertainment venues that would bring in tax revenue. State parks already under construction at the Cornfields and Taylor Yards, former rail yards near downtown, are two possible choices.

"We're converting dead space into something that's lucrative," Reyes says. "They've done it in other places. Now we need to look at the river as something valuable, worth investing into."

The Warner Bros., Disney and Universal movie studios abut the river. The Queen Mary is permanently docked at the river's mouth. However, there are limits to the river's potential. The headwaters rise next to a high school football field. The Corps of Engineers retains a veto over proposed projects that would break through the concrete and possibly compromise the floodwalls.

"After Hurricane Katrina and New Orleans, people are cognizant that flood control needs to remain a priority," says Los Angeles City Engineer Gary Lee Moore, supervisor of the revitalization project.

MacAdams, the poet, wants to reintroduce steelhead trout. He advocates putting the downtown rail tracks underground, "as the New York Central did to create Park Avenue."

Turning a master plan into reality will depend on money and political will, Reyes says. The river goes through nine of the 15 City Council districts, ensuring receptive ears at City Hall. But there's work to educate voters on the river's value, architect Golding says.

One public relations obstacle: The river doesn't touch the influential West Side, Malibu or Beverly Hills. "That's been a huge problem for Friends of the Los Angeles River * the

river doesn't run through any rich neighborhoods," MacAdams says. "We don't have any movie stars. We don't have any celebrities."

Reyes says the river also has an "image problem."

"We were brainwashed to think it was nothing but a sewer. Some say it's like trying to put lipstick on a pig," he says.

Golding says activists will have to be patient in building public sentiment. "It took a very long time to chain this river in concrete," he says, "and it's going to take a long time to fix it."