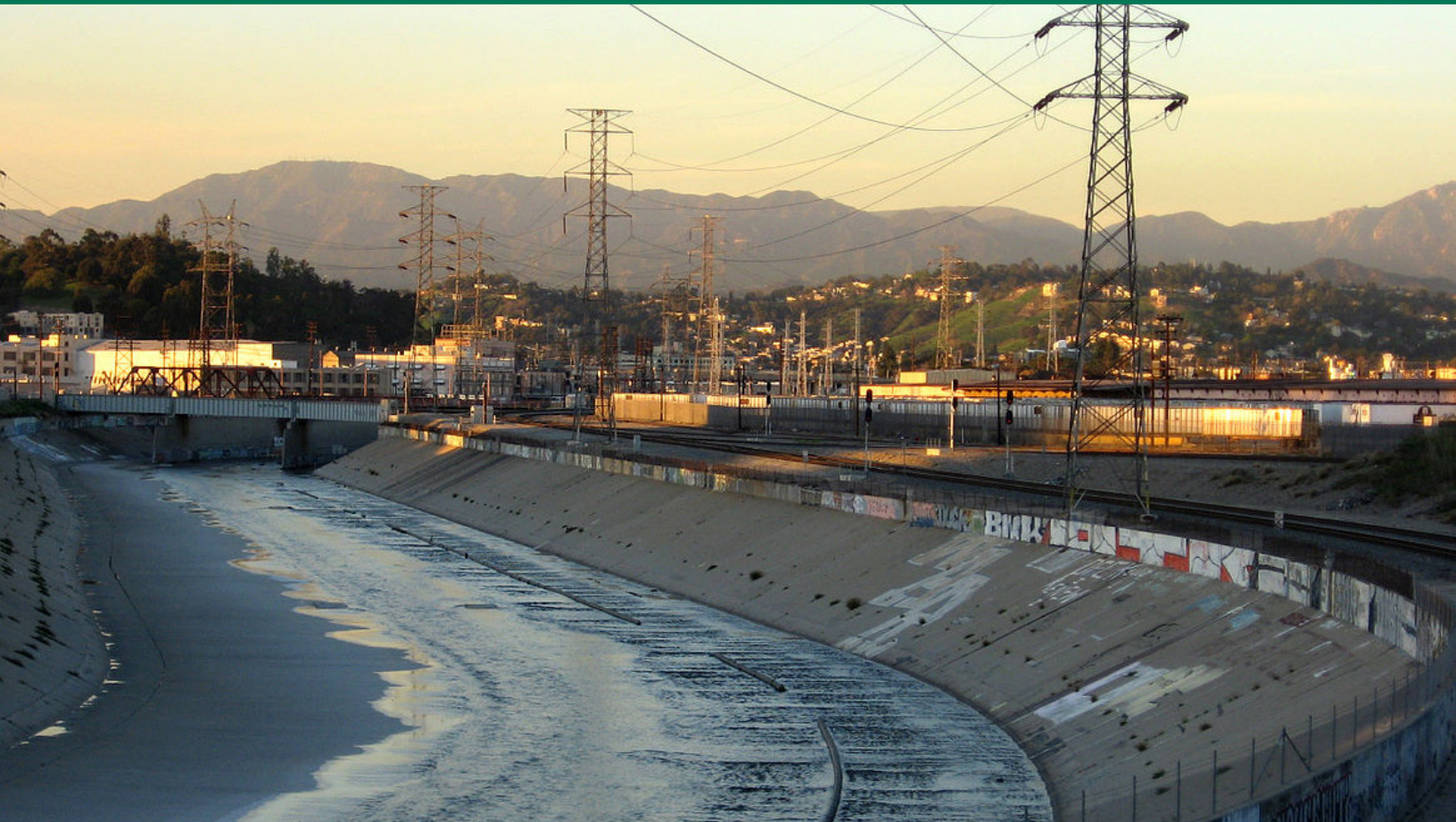


Whose Parks?

Community Perspectives on the Revitalization of the Los Angeles River



This case study is part of a 6-part series by UC Berkeley's Center for Community Innovation in partnership with Leadership Counsel (Fresno), Public Advocates (Bay Area), Public Counsel (LA), California Housing Partnership Corporation (Bay Area), and Asian Pacific Environmental Network (APEN).

*This series features community responses to recent state-funded climate change mitigation investments around urban greening, infill affordable housing, transit, and streetscape improvements. California Strategic Growth Council provided funding support for the larger research project, **Examining the Unintended Effects of Climate Change Mitigation: A New Tool to Predict Investment-Related Displacement**, of which this series is a part.*

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Acknowledgments:

The research team would like to offer our deepest thanks to numerous individuals who helped make this project possible. A special thanks goes to our Elizabeth Grassi (formerly at California Strategic Growth Council) and Leah Fisher currently of California Strategic Growth Council for supporting and shaping the larger project of which this case study is a component. Shashi Hanuman and Faizah Malik were central in scoping this case study and connecting the team with potential interviewees and helpful resources. Next, we are grateful to the interviewees who contributed their valuable time and insights to this case study: John Pacheco Bell of the Los Angeles Neighborhood Land Trust (formerly), Tonya Borja of Legacy LA, Lou Calanche of Legacy LA, Jon Christensen of the Institute of the Environment and Sustainability at the University of California, Los Angeles, Helen Leung of LA Más, Mark Lopez of East Yard Communities for Environmental Justice, Jessica Meaney of Investing in Place, Laura Raymond of Alliance for Community Transit- Los Angeles (ACT- LA), Sissy Trinh of Southeast Asian Community Alliance (SEACA), Jack Sahl of the Los Angeles County Open Space District, Elva Yañez of Prevention Institute, and an anonymous interviewee. Finally, we thank Alaina Bompiedi and Lana Wong of the California Air Research Board and Elva Yañez of Prevention Institute for helpful feedback on drafts of this case study.

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Introduction

Upon seeing it for the first time, some would hesitate to call the Los Angeles River a river. Yet the 51-mile long concretized channel, which carries stormwater and some recycled water downstream to Long Beach, and traverses the southern edge of the San Fernando Valley before running south into the Pacific Ocean, is central to LA's history and formation. Once the city's sole source of water, the river was famously lined with concrete to suppress the risk of floods in the first half of the 20th century and has been derided as a "scar on the landscape." Today, however, environmental groups and public officials are advocating for the river's revitalization.

With visions of the river as a vital and publicly accessible waterway running through the middle of Los Angeles, civic leaders are creating plans to repurpose former light industrial areas into mixed-use transit oriented communities near the river. As new parks, apartment buildings, and bike paths crop up in river-adjacent communities, so have concerns about "green gentrification," a process whereby neighborhoods become more attractive due to new amenities, increasing housing costs and spurring real estate speculation.¹

Drawing from 12 interviews with community advocates, researchers, and current and former city and county staff, this case study uplifts local perspectives on the revitalization of the LA river and its neighboring communities. While specific plans for the LA River revitalization are still being worked out, there has already been a surge of new development and infrastructure investments in the areas surrounding the river, raising questions about how best to ensure that the existing communities benefit from the new investment. By highlighting community perspectives on these recent investments, this case study aims to inform future coordinated anti-displacement and sustainability strategies for the City of Los Angeles and beyond.



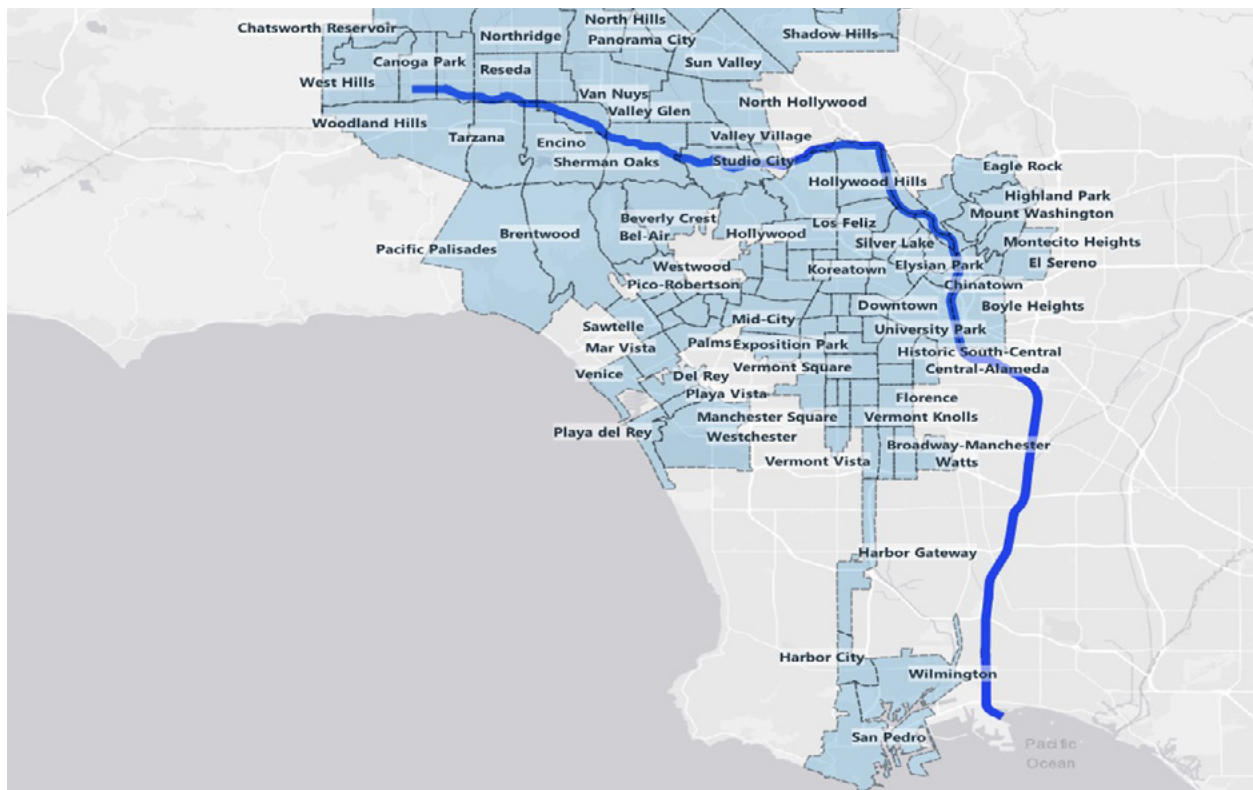
Los Angeles River (Credit: Downtowngal)

I. The LA River: From Natural River To Concretized Wastewater Channel

The LA River, which extends 51-miles and passes through 17 cities,² is LA County's primary waterway. The river starts at Canoga Park, runs along the southern edge of the San Fernando Valley, turns south near Downtown LA, and then flows through Southeast LA before discharging into the Alamitos Bay at the Port of Long Beach and finally into the Pacific Ocean (Figure 1).

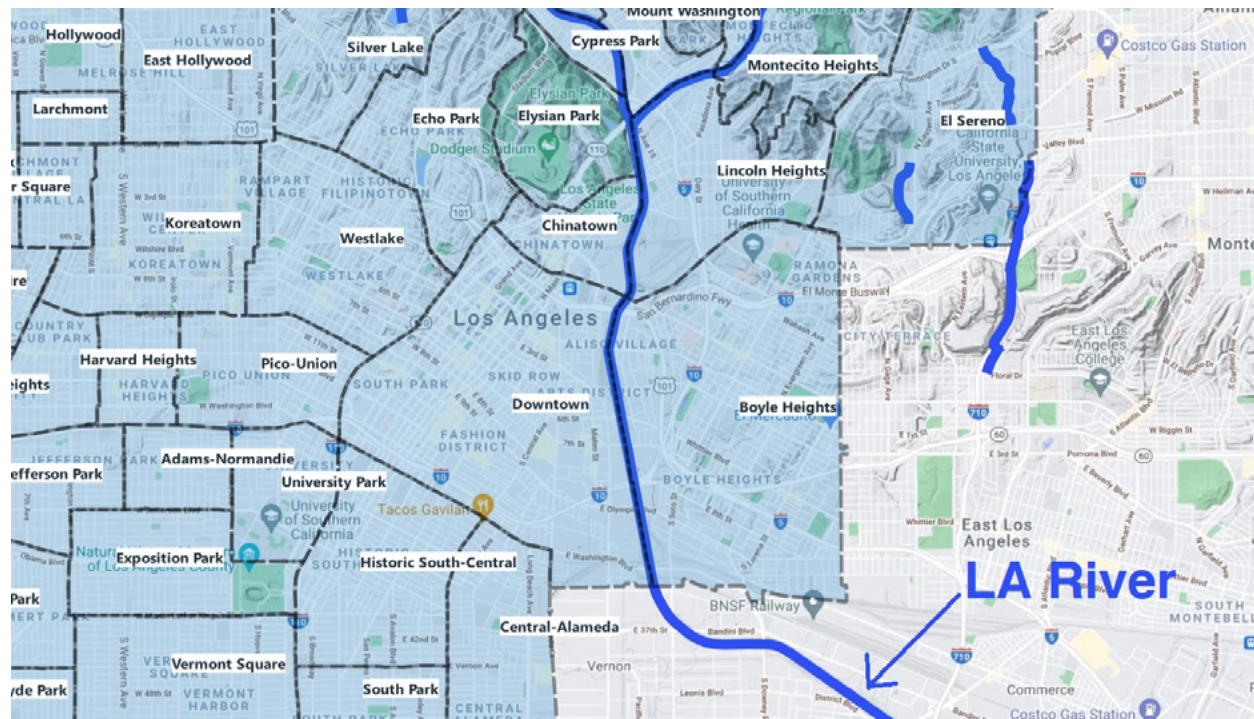
Historically, the LA River was a free-flowing natural river that served as the primary water source for the City of LA until the construction of the LA Aqueduct in 1913, transporting water from the Owens Valley into Southern California. Even with a depleted water supply for most of the year, the river still posed a flood risk to the City of LA and other cities that developed along the river. Following a particularly catastrophic flood in 1938, the Army Corps of Engineers led efforts to re-route and pave the river's bed and banks in concrete. Channelization efforts continued to straighten and concretize the river, and by 1958, the LA River fully transformed from "an ecosystem into a freeway for moving flood water efficiently and safely from mountains to the sea."³ Today, the LA River is essentially a fenced off stormwater channel fed by treatment plants in LA, Burbank, and Glendale.⁴

Figure 1: Neighborhoods spanning the Los Angeles River. Source: Mapping LA, Los Angeles Times; Los Angeles Open Data.⁵



The diverse neighborhoods lining the banks of the river have gone through multiple periods of transition, including the demolition of areas formerly known as Chavez Ravine and Old Chinatown under the guise of “community improvement” efforts (Figure 2). In the 1980s, a poet and activist famously cut through fencing to stage performance art along a stretch of the river just north of downtown, setting into motion a movement of artists and activists to revive the river to its natural state and launching the establishment of an organization called Friends of the Los Angeles River (FoLAR).⁶ In 1985, FoLAR pressured elected officials to restore the river to its state prior to channelization as a greenbelt through the city. In the decades that followed, FoLAR’s mission was embraced by elected officials, notably Councilmember Ed Reyes, and provided the unifying vision to bring green infrastructure projects and investments to the neighborhoods along the river.

Figure 2: City of LA extents of the LA River (LA River highlighted in blue), Source: Google Maps



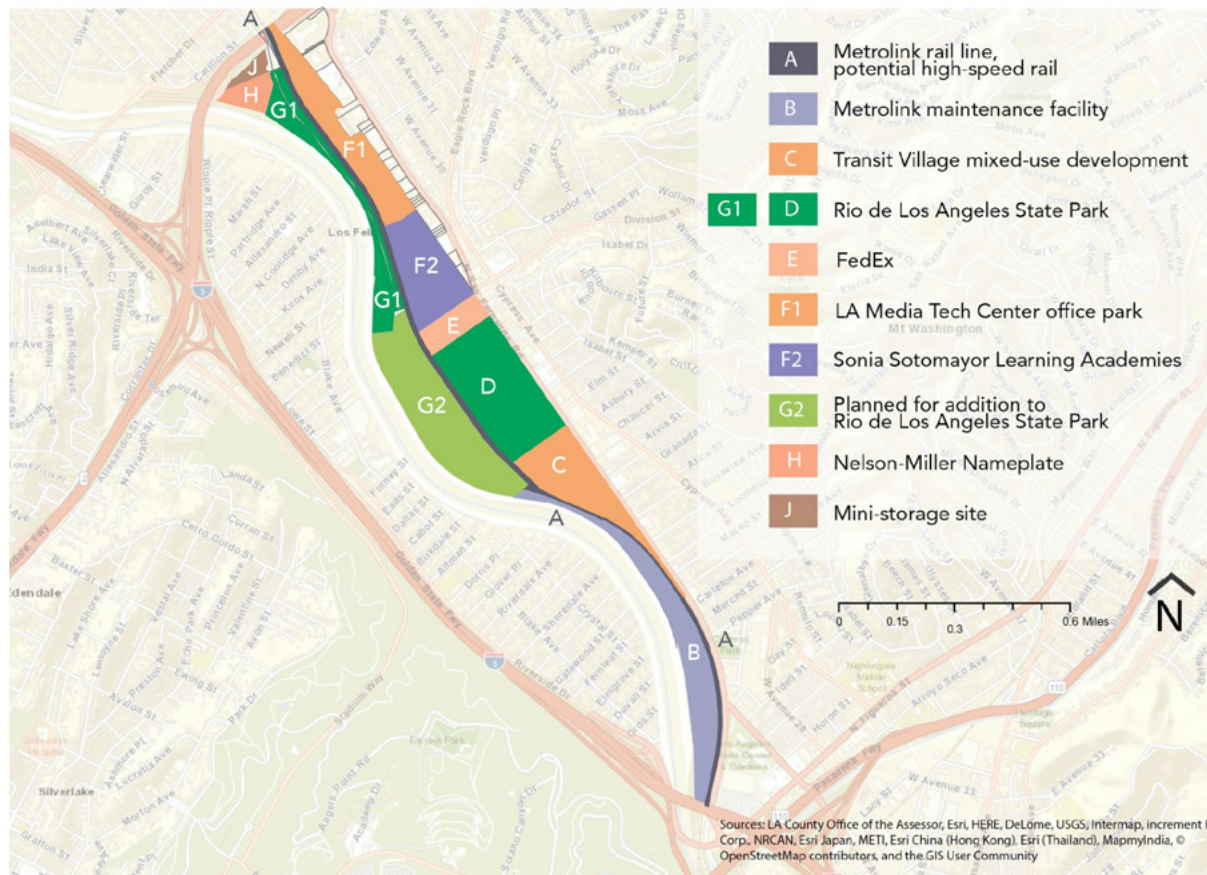
II. Taylor Yard and the Dawn of New Investment

Although river restoration efforts have picked up momentum and led to the development of new parks, bike paths, and sustainable water reclamation projects throughout the county,⁷ the flashpoint of new investment remains the 11-mile stretch of the river within the City of Los Angeles — from Elysian Park to Downtown Los Angeles — called the “Glendale narrows” (Figure 3). Serving as the geographic spine of the city’s historic industrial corridor, the downtown-adjacent stretch of the river has already seen significant new parks and housing investments nearby. Each of these investments has highlighted the challenges of investing in underserved communities with widespread housing insecurity. Recently, certain major development plans

in particular — Taylor Yard and the Casitas Lofts — have incited particularly fervent community responses.

Referred to as the "crown jewel" of the LA River restoration by Mayor Eric Garcetti, Taylor Yard is a 42-acre former train yard for the Southern Pacific railroad located across the river from the Elysian Valley neighborhood. The proposed development plan aims to turn the stretch of river into a 100-acre park with community facilities, a cafe, and a museum, with the goal of transforming the space into a popular regional destination.⁸

Figure 3: Taylor Yard Project Areas, Source: The River Project (2021)⁹



Implementation of the Taylor Yard project will occur in concurrent phases on multiple parcels that were acquired by the City of LA from private developers and county authorities. The first phase of the project involves the development of the 100-acre park on property known as the G2 parcel. Acquired by the City of LA in 2017, the park will link the adjacent Rio de Los Angeles State Park (established in 2007) and the river to the west, facilitating access to the river's habitat. In 2019, the City of Los Angeles released three design options for the G2 site, and construction is scheduled to begin in 2026.¹⁰

Just east of the G2 site is the site of the proposed Taylor Yard Transit Village, a \$180 million

project that will include 400 housing units, approximately 30,000 square feet of retail space, and 2½ acres of open space. Developed jointly by McCormack Baron Salazar and the Los Angeles Metropolitan Transportation Authority, or Metro, more than 300 of the homes will be affordable rental apartments for households earning at or below 60% of the Area Median Income.¹¹ The project, which initially focused solely on transit, evolved to include affordable housing in an effort to respond to community needs. Local residents expressed to McCormack Baron Salazar and Metro:

“We've had rail here for 100 years, give us something better, something nicer. Give us affordable housing [and] some open space.”¹²

Northeast of the G2 parcel is the “Bowtie Parcel,” also called G1. Beginning in the 2000s, the Bowtie parcel was the staging ground for art installations hosted by Clockshop, an arts organization located in Elysian Valley. Curations such as audio tours and architectural installations transformed the Bowtie into a kind of outdoor museum that highlights the area’s ecological and social history. As park redevelopment plans have grown to incorporate the site, Clockshop has served as a bridge between community members and parks agencies to restore the site and advocated for passive recreation and ecological demonstration projects.¹³

Adjacent to the Bowtie Parcel is the site of the Nelson Miller Nameplate (H), where a New York-based developer is proposing to build 419 residential units, 64,000 square feet of commercial space, a seven-story parking structure with 720 parking spaces, and a rooftop farm.¹⁴ Known as the Casitas Lofts, the project has drawn staunch criticism from park advocates and neighborhood groups.¹⁵ Julia Meltzer, the Executive Director of Clockshop, argued that the project will set a “dangerous precedent by allowing a private developer to profit from decades of public planning and investment in river restoration.”¹⁶ The



Aerial view of the Los Angeles River (Credit: Eric Shalov)

Natural Resources Defense Council and FoLAR also objected to the development on the grounds that it would cut off access to the park and not include affordable housing.¹⁷

The Taylor Yard plans follow a series of new park investments along the LA River. For example, the LA State Historic Park — completed in 2017 — was developed on a 34-acre former industrial lot located south of Taylor Yard and across the river near Chinatown. The park development was the product of community activism that resisted previous plans for a warehouse on the site.^{18 19}

Additionally, according to many LA advocates and residents, large-scale urban greening projects in previously disinvested areas such as the Elysian Valley have already contributed to “green

gentrification.” This phrase describes a phenomenon in which green investments drive a rise in property values, attracting affluent new residents and displacing low-income residents by pricing them out of their neighborhood.²⁰ In an attempt to mitigate the gentrification effects of the new “green” investments along the river, policy makers have started to incorporate anti-displacement frameworks to guide new park investments. Environmental and anti-displacement advocates have also strengthened their relationships and consolidated their efforts to both improve the environmental quality of the area and keep low-income residents in place.

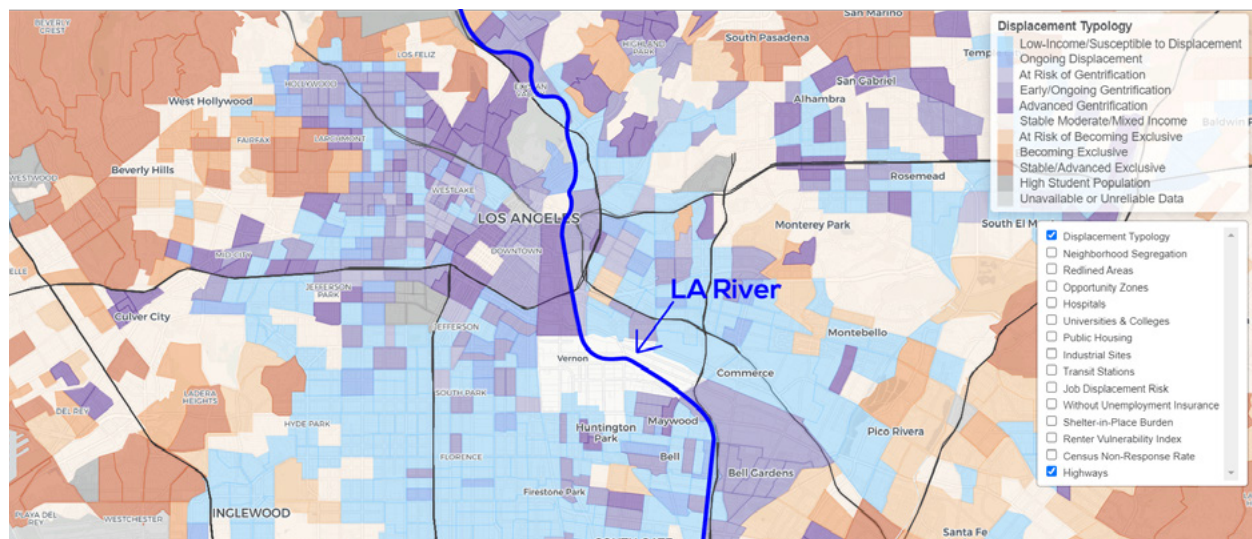
III. Neighborhood Change and Green Gentrification

Interviewees have observed signs of both direct and indirect displacement in areas adjacent to the LA River and many older neighborhoods in the surrounding region of Northeast Los Angeles. According to Lou Calanche, a community development organizer with Legacy LA, there has been an influx of high end businesses moving into the industrial warehouses, bringing “entertainment industry folks who we would never see in this part of town.”²¹ Elva Yañez of the Prevention Institute shared concerns over green gentrification, explaining that even the announcements of upcoming park investments have led to real estate speculation and displacement²²:

“The revitalization concept has been going on for quite some time and..has spurred private investments in properties [as] is happening in downtown LA. The properties are design[ed] for a more affluent sector of the population and there’s a lot of fear among residents who are already seeing a lot of displacement.”

Maps made by the Urban Displacement Project reveal that as of 2018 (prior to the announcement of the Taylor Yard plan), neighborhoods in the City of Los Angeles adjacent to the LA River were either low-income and susceptible to displacement, at risk of gentrification, or experiencing early/ongoing gentrification (Figure 4).²³

Figure 4: Gentrification and Displacement Analysis by Urban Displacement Project²⁴, based on 2018 American Community Survey Data



Sissy Trinh, founder of the Southeast Asian Community Alliance (SEACA), noted the disconnect between park projects and community needs. She described the challenge of balancing the benefits of new park amenities with potential displacement pressures:

“You see all these beautiful renderings of parks and people riding bikes and kayaking, and our students were saying things like, ‘Where are we in this? [...] My family are garment workers and make fifteen thousand dollars a year, and rents in these places are more than we make. So where are we going to go?’ Should we fight against more parks or do we give up? We can’t say no to parks but we can’t assume that saying yes to parks means gentrification and displacement. There has to be a third option.”²⁵

IV. Coordinating Park Equity and Anti-Displacement Efforts

Interviewees agreed that the path to truly equitable development in LA begins with greater alignment among the city’s many disparate advocacy groups that focus on anti-displacement, conservation, and park equity. According to Jon Christensen, a former advisory board member of FoLAR and adjunct assistant professor with the Institute of the Environment and Sustainability at UCLA, there is growing awareness among environmentalists and park advocates about the importance of addressing displacement as part of their work²⁶:

“A lot of environmentalists and environmental groups are jumping on the bandwagon but I think they realize that green infrastructure, parks, particularly in disadvantaged communities, is in danger of being stymied if they don’t address concerns about displacement and gentrification...They need to be talking about equity and justice and displacement.”

Christensen then attributed the uptick in private investment to the city’s ambitious park goals around the Taylor Yard and downtown-adjacent segment of the L.A. River²⁷:

“When you have the mayor of Los Angeles at the very beginning of his term saying this is the ‘crown jewel of river revitalization’ in Los Angeles..., it’s not hard to conclude that some of that increase in real estate prices and turnover in commercial and residential is due to a vision [of] a much more green and upscale community on the river.”

The Los Angeles State Historic Park and Taylor Yard projects have pushed many environmental advocacy groups and parks agencies to incorporate anti-displacement policies into new investments. Yañez, who was a state parks commissioner after the land was acquired for the new Los Angeles State Historic Park, said that the decision to develop the park was made to benefit underserved communities that had historically been denied these amenities, “before people really understood green gentrification, or understood that you should [intervene] before the [land] acquisition.”

Seeing the need for grassroots advocacy in this area, Trinh helped form the Los Angeles Regional Open Space and Affordable Housing (LA ROSAH) collaborative after discussions with the Mountains Recreation and Conservancy Authority. LA ROSAH published policy

recommendations for incorporating affordable housing into future park investments, explaining how to take advantage of parks and housing financing models for this purpose.²⁸

In another example of collaboration among environmental advocacy and community organizations, the Audubon Center at Debs Park joined forces with SEACA and Public Counsel to publish a report on recommendations for addressing green gentrification caused by new park investments.²⁹ The report, “Greening in Place: Protecting Communities from Displacement,” provides an extensive list of anti-displacement and value-capture policy proposals and also references research showing the impact of green infrastructure on increased property values in the City of Los Angeles.³⁰

In response to increasing pressure from advocacy groups, public agencies — especially at the county level — have started to incorporate anti-displacement measures into their planning processes for parks and green infrastructure. In 2016, Los Angeles voters passed Measure A, a tax that provides \$96.8 million annually for parks projects and one-third of which is designated specifically for high-need communities. The Regional Parks and Open Space District, the county-level agency in charge of administering the funds, is moving to incorporate anti-displacement strategies into its grant application process.³¹ As noted by Jack Sahl of the LA Regional Parks and Open Space District,³²

“I am envisioning a future where we are working in a community that is historically underfunded in parks and we partner with the community to address their needs.”

Sahl identified two areas where anti-displacement policy could be integrated into the agency’s process for distributing park grants to cities. First, grant applications could require the inclusion of explicit anti-displacement policies. Second, the county could require grant recipients to “address” the possible threats of “displacement and gentrification” with the community.³³

V. Looking Forward

As interviewees consider the future of the LA River and its surrounding areas, community-engaged anti-displacement measures are front of mind. For example, the county’s recently published LA River Master Plan calls for the “creation of a land bank or similar entity to purchase land along the river while it is still inexpensive and hold it for eventual sale or lease to developers of affordable housing.”³⁴ Organizations involved in the LA ROSAH collaborative published the Pathway to Parks & Affordable Housing Joint Development report, which identifies several models for how parks and affordable housing could be jointly developed.³⁵ The aforementioned “Greening in Place” report provides an extensive list of recommendations such as tenant protections and community benefits agreements.³⁶

Interviewees commonly pointed to the need for community control of land — particularly through Community Land Trusts (CLTs) — as a long-term solution to combat green gentrification’s impacts. The LA CLT Coalition has catalyzed greater awareness of the community benefits of CLTs and has made some progress in getting CLTs on the city and county agenda.³⁷ With

political momentum for CLTs and other community ownership models growing, the LA County Supervisors are exploring the idea of establishing land banking for the development of affordable housing; the properties could then be managed by CLTs to help oversee new development designed to respond to community needs.³⁸ Recently, the County also funded a \$14 million pilot program to fund CLT organizations. Many of these land trusts are now in the process of acquiring properties.³⁹

Addressing residential displacement is more important than ever as the pandemic's impacts continue to unfold. Many long standing racial and economic inequalities in Los Angeles County have been exacerbated during the pandemic,⁴⁰ while home prices have continued to soar.⁴¹ Jon Christensen of UCLA noted,

*"They say the best time to plant a tree is twenty years ago and the second best time is right now. I think the same thing is true of anti-displacement strategies."*⁴²

Interviewees agreed that this is an opportune moment to bring together previously disparate community agendas around park equity and anti-displacement to redirect the LA River's revitalization towards greater community ends.

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