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Residents Float Ideas for L.A. River

Suggestions at first public meeting for master plan include European-style cafes and greenbelts instead of concrete walls.

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Some want bike paths. Some want marshes and cottonwoods. Others have more cosmopolitan dreams of European-style waterfront cafes.

Dozens of residents gathered Saturday to share their visions of how to bring the Los Angeles River back to life.

They scribbled their thoughts on colored sticky notes and pasted them onto giant maps of the 32-mile stretch of river being studied as part of a 20-year restoration plan.

The meeting in North Hollywood launched a series of public workshops designed to help craft a master plan to revitalize the waterway from Canoga Park southeast to Boyle Heights. Planning consultants say they are seeking ideas for restoring the river, which takes the form of a concrete channel through much of the city.

Los Angeles residents clutching their morning lattes critiqued three artists' renderings and assorted photographs displayed on easels in a large room at the North Weddington Recreation Center.

The ideas flowed freely, but not always in the same direction.

One conceptual drawing showed the river wending past trees, landscaped plantings and concrete walls in downtown Los Angeles.

"Yes — like Paris. Please," someone had scribbled on a note.

"Good space for outdoor art events and outdoor programs," someone else wrote.

But Barbara Tarnowski of Tujunga stopped short when she saw a drawing of concrete vistas.

"That's ugly. That's what they want to do with the L.A. River?" she said. "That's not restoring habitat — that's restoring more

cement. That's not going to help the animals. They're going to shy away."

Tarnowski would do away with the concrete and line the river bottom with pebbles. On the banks, she would plant cottonwood and live oak trees. That would create a corridor for wild animals now being squeezed out by urban sprawl, she said.

Public arts advocate Mary Garcia marked her own comments on an easel of blank paper.

"If you're going to have wall space — you can have art," wrote Garcia, executive director of the NoHo Regional Arts Council in North Hollywood.

To make her point, she waved her hand across the photograph displayed on one easel of a European river surrounded by high walls. That wall surface could be used for painted murals, she said. She was critical of another photo, saying the bridge over the river was too stark.

"This should be covered with ivy, and then it would be green. They missed an opportunity. And here? You could do bamboo."

In China, which Garcia recently visited, designers often embed rock boulders in walls to provide a natural texture, she said.

One major challenge of the project is balancing the desire for vegetation with the need to protect homes and businesses from flooding, planners said.

A consulting landscape architect, Bill Wenk of Wenk Associates in Denver, said he was not surprised that residents had differing opinions of concrete.

"It's an either-or situation for a lot of people — concrete is bad, green is good," Wenk said.

But with good design, concrete and greenery can be integrated into a river plan, he added.

City Councilman Ed Reyes, a longtime champion of restoring the river, welcomed people to the workshop. "This is the beginning of a long dance, so be patient," he said.

The next public workshop is to be from 10 a.m. to 2 p.m. Saturday at the Goodwill Worksource Center, 342 San Fernando Road, in Lincoln Heights.