

Los Angeles Downtown News

Return of the River

by Kathryn Maese

Hoping to spur investment and interest in the long-maligned Los Angeles River, a coalition of city and community leaders last Thursday announced a splashy two-month campaign to spread the word about efforts to revitalize the waterway.

Organizers say the outreach program, dubbed "Los Angeles River: The Future Is Now," is designed to educate residents about ongoing and future projects focusing on everything from pollution prevention to safety to a long-term master plan to revitalize a 30-mile stretch of the river from Canoga Park to Boyle Heights.

During the press conference on the bank of the river, City Councilman Ed Reyes said an engineering and planning firm will be selected Aug. 1 to help devise and implement the \$3 million master plan. The vision is intended to transform the river from an ugly concrete flood control channel into a habitat teeming with native plants, animals and activity.

Reyes, who chairs the L.A. River Ad Hoc Committee, said he hopes the campaign will persuade developers and businesses to invest in amenities such as bike paths, restaurants, retail and housing along the 51-mile route that includes Downtown Los Angeles and ends in Long Beach.

"This is a huge step in coalescing the interested groups and educating people about cleaning up the river," Reyes said. "We are trying to pierce the consciousness of the city by drawing a connection between the river and the ocean."

The campaign is timed to unfold around Earth Day, which falls on April 22, with more than 30 citywide events in April and May. These include river clean-ups, photo and art exhibits, Earth Day festivals, and a design charrette that will re-imagine the river.



City Councilman Ed Reyes was one of the local leaders and stakeholders last week who kicked off a new Los Angeles River outreach effort. Photo by Gary Leonard.

Part of the overall effort is to improve not just the river, but its reputation; currently, many people know it only for Hollywood car chases and the muddy waters that rage during the winter storm season. To that effect, artist and city employee Oscar Amaro unveiled a rendering that will brand the campaign. The artwork depicts a Downtown bridge, with City Hall in the background, and crystal water alive with dragonflies, finches and herons.

"I was inspired by my childhood when I would visit the river and see newts, frogs and salamanders," Amaro said. "That wasn't that long ago, and now they are not there anymore. This is a vision I'd like to see, to have our wildlife back."

It's a goal long championed by the Friends of the Los Angeles River (FoLAR), whose founder Lewis MacAdams started working on bettering the waterway 20 years ago. In recent years, a few small sections of the river have been improved with bike paths and annual cleanup efforts led by FoLAR. Yet the movement has lacked a concerted, ongoing effort by civic, community and business entities.

FoLAR Executive Director Shelly Backlar said the new campaign will give the revitalization effort a dose of publicity that the nonprofit group has not been able to muster on its own.

"It's powerful to know that Lewis MacAdams so many years ago walked the river and saw the potential, and now so many stakeholders see the possibilities," Backlar said. "This is the spine of our city."

Backlar is part of a newly formed taskforce charged with reducing plastic products in the river - the main culprit being the hundreds of grocery bags that clog the waterway and eventually float into the ocean. During a river rescue demonstration at the event, a descending helicopter flushed multiple plastic bags out of the brush.

Downtown-based company Earth Wise is working with FoLAR to decrease the plastic debris by creating recyclable bags. Company President Stanley Joffe, who attended the event, said a similar effort in Australia produced results in six months, with 90% of grocers adopting the new product. "We're committed to cleaning up the city and county," he said. Product samples will be handed out at events in the next two months.

For Downtown, a revitalized river could mean prime waterfront property, and add to redevelopment efforts in the City Center. Some planners and advocates, such as MacAdams, have proposed creating a verdant stretch of parkland interspersed with residential and commercial developments on the east bank of the river that snakes through Downtown. A channel would fill up with water in the rainy season if the city deployed inflatable check dams that it already owns for flood control purposes.

Two key elements have already fallen into place along the stretch of river that flanks Downtown. Last year the city broke ground on a 60-acre park in Taylor Yard just north of Downtown. The long-negotiated plan will create soccer fields and baseball diamonds, picnic areas and will preserve the local habitat. Along North Main Street near Chinatown, development of the Cornfield state park is underway. That will create a link to the river and surrounding communities.

"I still get jazzed when I see the river," Backlar said. "Even when I pass through Downtown and industrial, concrete-jacketed areas of the river, it's easy to get new ideas."

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