

Revived waterways would bring new life to city

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Los Angeles originally took shape along its river, but over the last 70 years, it has turned its back on the waterway that gave it birth. Now, by returning to the river, it could find a new lease on life.

Reviving the Los Angeles -- turning a concrete conduit into a green waterway -- would change the very nature of the city, and nowhere more than here in the San Fernando Valley. It would give a place that has lost much of its natural environment a new lease on life and provide an economic spur to varied communities along its course.

The current sad state of the river is a relatively recent phenomenon. Back in the 1930s, a series of floods pummeled the Los Angeles basin. This being the era of the Depression and the WPA, the Army Corps of Engineers went to work in a big way to make sure these types of floods would never again devastate the lives and properties of Angelenos. In a fit of engineering overreach, the entire 52 miles of the L.A. River was tamed, and turned from a wild and unpredictable river into a "flood-control channel."

In the mind-set of the times, any such modernization and development was seen as a positive move. There was little awareness of how such a massive alteration would affect local ecosystems, or wilderness treasures that might be lost forever.

For Valley residents, the river has been viewed mostly as a broad scar across our landscape. What once united Los Angeles, and served it for centuries, now separated communities from each other, and disconnected Angelenos from their natural birthright. Today we have a chance to begin to repair the damage to the river, and to our city. Like many such bold efforts, it began as the dream of a few. But now, an ever-growing group of visionaries is making serious efforts at restoring some of the river's former glory.

This will require some reverse engineering. Right now, instead of using storm-water runoff to recharge the Valley's massive aquifers -- the natural underground reservoirs that underlie the Valley -- millions of gallons of fresh water are shunted off to the ocean.

The result of this sad state of affairs can be seen in stark, barren shorelines, with signs posted to keep bikers and hikers away. What could be a place teeming with wildlife, trails and foliage -- an aquatic oasis in a desert city -- instead only contributes to a sense of bleakness.

More than anything, this squanders much of the capital that brought people to Los Angeles. People poured into L.A., and later the Valley, for a vision of what Dana Bartlett, a Methodist minister at the turn of the century, called "a better city." Los Angeles was supposed to be a city where we would blend urbanity with nature, smell the flowers and enjoy the fruit trees that flourish in this place.

By restoring the river we can recover some of that promise. Today Los Angeles is woefully lacking in parkways, open spaces and, most of all, water features such as rivers, streams and lakes. We need to take a cue from other regions -- such as San Antonio -- that have glorified their rivers, making them the center of their commercial and recreational lives.

The Los Angeles River can serve as such a catalyst here. Unfortunately, there is a hitch. In today's tight budgetary times, public money is scarce; putting money on lifestyle improvements tends to get short shrift when vital services like schools, hospitals and public safety are threatened.

Our proposal is to find a way to make a large portion of river improvement self-financing. With only a small public investment, we propose using the enhanced economic value of an improved riverway as a means of gaining private investment.

The essential element here is real estate, the one component of our local economy that is generating the most new wealth. We propose that the government use its power -- the control of the property adjacent to the river, the power of the General Plan, and the ability to create and implement specific plans -- to lure private capital.

This can be done by providing tax incentives and by assisting in the assembly of land. It is possible to create "envelope" entitlements that would allow and even encourage investors and developers to go into projects with their eyes wide open. Ask developers; knowing exactly what they can create in advance, and eliminating the risks of typical projects, would provide a huge incentive to invest.

There is something that the business, investment and development community can do to help realize this vision for a river renaissance: Create an economic development plan and a practical vision that will complement current private and public efforts and initiatives. Of course, any development or commercialization would have to be river-friendly, but it is entirely possible to incentivize the kind of investment that will enhance the river proper, encourage community-friendly uses, and provide a return on investment all at the same time.

The Community Redevelopment Agency might be of some value in this area as well. With its planning expertise, as well as its ability to assemble properties and to construct tax incentive packages, the CRA is well positioned to provide the nexus between public intervention and private investment.

An L.A. River-specific plan could include meandering paseos for hiking, biking and skating. This would be complemented with shady grassy areas with benches and other facilities for picnicking. Imagine a park that is 52 miles long!

On the commercial side, there could be myriad opportunities for coffee and refreshment stops, snacks and rentals, as well as specialty stands and stores. Where the shorelines are wide enough, opportunities are presented for mixed uses alongside linear housing developments of various configurations.

This great parkway could do much for the varied communities through which it runs. Many of these are now trying to develop a sense of identity, which the river could help provide. There is no need for uniformity along the way. Sections of river could be decorated in manners that reflect the enormous diversity of our populace and of each of our communities.

Reviving the Los Angeles River would be a great ecological triumph, but it can be much more than that. It could become the catalyst for a rebirth of Los Angeles as the great, natural expansive city that brought so many of us here in the first place.

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