

L.A. River lakefront property?

\$45 million plan would dam mile-long downtown

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A mile-long stretch of the Los Angeles River through downtown could be transformed into a seasonal recreational lake for boating under a plan being considered by city leaders.

Modeled after a project in Tempe, Ariz., the lake would be created by placing inflatable dams in the concrete flood-control channel. City engineers recently completed a bare-bones study on the benefits and challenges of the estimated \$45 million to \$50 million lake and are seeking public comments through June 30.

Proponents say the lake has the potential to transform not only the image of the river but the quality of life for residents of the adjacent communities.

"Water has a way of healing, rejuvenating and creating a sense of place," said Councilman Ed Reyes, who chairs the city's Ad Hoc River Committee. "From an ecological point of view and turning around the city's most contaminated industrial zone around the river it opens a whole new opportunity."

But some river advocates loathe the idea, calling it an expensive folly that would end their dream of taking the concrete out of the channel and returning it to a natural river.

"The river used to be something of a willow forest in this area and supported songbirds that are now on the endangered species list. I'd like to see some habitat restored and see the river as a greenway," said Jessica Hall, an environmental designer with Northeast Trees.

"When you create a dam you're really putting \$45 million worth of infrastructure into a wholly artificial structure."

Besides public opinion, the lake has some big challenges. First, railroad lines and utility lines cover the land on both sides of the river through downtown, making public access impossible without bridges, tunnels or moving the lines.

Second, the river is used as a flood channel designed to move water as quickly as possible to the ocean. Engineers would have to design a system to immediately drain the lake if, for example, there was an unexpected summer storm when the lake is full.

Third, almost all of the water flowing in the river from spring to fall comes from sewage treatment plants and urban runoff. While the treated water is considered safe for skin contact, that downtown stretch of river has had problems with bacteria, lead, oil, algae, ammonia, scum and odors.

Friends of the Los Angeles River founder Lewis MacAdams believes there are some problems to overcome, but he is optimistic about the lake and its potential to transform the river communities through downtown.

"Just like people want to live near parks, people want to live near water," he said. "It's important symbolically and people are going to want to live near it."

Other remain skeptical the city can or should try to overcome those challenges.

"We're trying to encourage people to appreciate the true potential of the revitalized river. This is a Disneyland version of what people think rivers should look like and not a very good one at that," said Melanie Winter, director of The River Project. "In the end you'll be able to get into a boat and float down a concrete canal."