

Park Could Reshape L.A. to the Core

With careful planning, the Cornfield site can herald a rebirth of the city's center. Mayor Hahn must take an active role.

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By Joel R. Reynolds and Tom Soto

A good lawsuit can work wonders. Three years ago, a coalition of community groups sued to block an industrial warehouse project on an abandoned 32-acre rail yard called the Chinatown Cornfield near downtown Los Angeles. Four months later, a similar lawsuit was filed to block a 40-acre industrial development at another rail yard, the Taylor Yard, a mile north along the Los Angeles River. Both cases led to settlement discussions with the developers, culminating with the state of California purchasing the parcels for development as parklands.

But the full promise of these parklands can only be achieved through cooperation. At Taylor Yard, things seem to be going well. Last month Gov. Gray Davis and Los Angeles Mayor James K. Hahn announced a city-state partnership for development and management of the future state park.

This widely hailed agreement — the product of extensive negotiations among the mayor's staff, state parks Director Ruth Coleman, Councilman Ed Reyes, state Sen. Gil Cedillo (D-Los Angeles), Assemblywoman Jackie Goldberg (D-Los Angeles) and Santa Monica Mountains Conservancy head Joe Edmiston — resolves a dispute over active versus passive use of the park by providing for both, including nature trails, picnic tables and habitat restoration as well as soccer fields badly needed by the children of the surrounding neighborhoods.

This kind of cooperation will be at least as essential at the Cornfield, where the creation of a state park near the heart of downtown could be the first step in a rebirth of the city's historic center, which stretches from the El Pueblo de Los Angeles Historical Monument to the Los Angeles River. This unique potential, if it is to be realized, will require both political teamwork and enlightened urban planning — something long overdue in an area that for more than 100 years has been consigned almost exclusively to industrial uses or parking lots. For decades, there has seemed to be no real alternative.

The acquisition of the old rail yard at the Cornfield could change all that. Instead of a barren, brown field, the completed Cornfield State Park could provide shade and sanctuary, fields of green for rest and recreation, and restored historical attractions like the zanja madre, or mother canal, that brought water from the river to the early pueblo.

Instead of blocks of treeless pavement around the Cornfield, the streets could be lined with native sycamores and cottonwoods. Walkways and bikeways — along with the newly opened Gold Line — could provide alternatives to driving. Development around the park could include mixed commercial and residential projects, creating, over time, a shaded and economically vibrant pedestrian promenade from Union Station, El Pueblo and Olvera Street to the Gold Line station in Chinatown, then on to the Cornfield and the Los Angeles River Parkway. Instead of disconnected islands of historical, commercial or cultural interest, these and a hundred other important sites in downtown and its surrounding neighborhoods could be connected in a formally designated corridor that identifies and celebrates our city's heritage.

Change like this cannot happen, though, without coordination, and there are some positive signs. A Cornfield State Park Advisory Committee convened by Davis' administration issued a report in April endorsing this vision for the area, with the state park as the catalyst. The Gold Line provides a rapid transit anchor for tourism and development. And elected representatives from the area, including Reyes and Rep. Lucille Roybal-Allard (D-Los Angeles), have also made the park and revitalization around it a top priority.

But there's still a missing piece: a master plan that looks at the Cornfield and surrounding area as a whole, a plan that would build on and unify the diverse efforts already underway. Formulating such a plan should draw not just on the planning expertise within city agencies but also on input from leading urban landscape architects around the country. We need a plan equal to the unique potential of this critical property.

There is an important role here for Hahn. Although he supported acquisition of the Cornfield for state parkland, his staff has indicated that developing a broader plan for the surrounding area "is not a top priority for the city." It need not be. It is enough simply to recognize that, in this unique alignment of vision and circumstance, there is a golden opportunity to make a lasting improvement to the downtown Los Angeles area — and a need for the mayor's active engagement and leadership. This is not unlike the role he recently played in working successfully for an agreement with the state at the Taylor Yard.

Without coordination among relevant city agencies — as well as coordination of the overlapping state, federal, county and city government jurisdictions in the area — there is little chance that a coherent plan will emerge. Without the direct involvement of the mayor, it is inevitable that the area's design will be dictated, as it so often is, by the city's transportation planners, with the predictable result that vehicles, rather than people, will remain the first design priority. To accommodate more cars, for example, the city has already proposed widening North Spring Street along the Cornfield site, using land that, at least in part, could instead be added to the park. As the head of the city's planning bureaucracy, the mayor could insist that pedestrian needs, not vehicle carrying capacity, be the overriding design parameter and that parkland should take precedence over street-widening.

"There is an overwhelming consensus," said the Cornfield advisory committee in its report, "for the vision of the Cornfield as a critical building block in an urban renaissance of the historic heart of the city — a beginning in the rebirth of downtown Los Angeles and recognition of the richness of our past and the enormous possibilities of our collective future." This consensus is an opportunity that the city cannot afford to waste. It is an opportunity for leadership that we urge Hahn not to ignore.

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