Equitable Redevelopment For The Los Angeles River

Once a quixotic dream of a small but dedicated group of advocates, restoration of the Los Angeles River has become the crown jewel of greater Los Angeles’s environmental and urban revitalization efforts. Yet for all its breathtaking possibilities, the River’s revitalization runs a serious risk of exacerbating existing environmental and economic inequities in the Los Angeles River Watershed. Additionally, recent funding, planning and implementation of LA River projects have raised fundamental concerns in terms of transparency, accountability, process and democratic decision-making and equal justice to distribute fairly the benefits and burdens of revitalization.

Vision Statement

To ensure a restored Los Angeles River brings health, economic and environmental benefits to all residents and does not become a tool for further gentrification and displacement, revitalization efforts must foster stable communities free of residential and business displacement. Accordingly, all revitalization efforts must be guided by community-led decision making and be transparent and accountable to the public at every step. Restoration must prioritize and promote inclusive, equitable, health-driven outcomes and promote climate resiliency. In short – River revitalization must be a model of equitable redevelopment. Our long-term quality of life as a region depends on it.

Equity Demands

We’ve identified seven redevelopment components into which LA River and Watershed decision-makers and funders must incorporate equity principles to combat inequitable outcomes already threatening River communities. For each, we’ve articulated equity goals and the programs for realizing them. We demand all River planning and projects adopt these principles.
THE DEMAND: Enhanced Infrastructure Finance Districts must be in the service of inclusive, accountable development and must not subsidize displacement.

PROGRAM TO ACHIEVE IT:

Enhanced Infrastructure Finance Districts must require:

1. Mandatory 25% set asides of the tax increment for affordable housing at deep affordability levels, including extremely low-income limits

2. On-site affordable housing in residential projects funded by or located with the EIFD

3. Support for local, community-serving small businesses

4. Job standards requiring -
   a. Targeted hiring for disadvantaged applicant and small, minority, women and veteran owned enterprises
   b. Minimum 30% local hiring goals

5. Thriving wages

6. Community-led vision for defining “significant benefit to district”

7. Clawback recourse for private developments that fail to deliver identified communitywide benefits
THE DEMAND: Public funding must advance equitable outcomes for communities through effective implementation that includes transparency and displacement prevention.

PROGRAMS TO ACHIEVE IT:

1. Public funding guidelines must require community-led visioning and engagement, grassroots organizing and community education.

2. Public funding must require racial, ethnic, health, economic, and environmental justice impacts evaluations for all funding programs.

3. A centralized current database, accessible online and via phone applications, must be funded and created to give community members who speak the many languages of greater Los Angeles real-time access to the status of all publicly funded proposals and projects. The user-friendly, responsive, transparency portal must contain:
   a. All RFPs including (i) all applications; (ii) details on vetting and decision-making process; (iii) announcement of grant awards; and (iv) all reporting required by the award
   b. All requests for funding not subject to RFPs
   c. All materials reflecting award decisions
   d. Any changes to funding requirements
   e. Annual reports and audits
   f. Data based on race, color, national origin and income.

4. Combat Displacement
   a. Public funding must prioritize 100% affordable housing where appropriate with at least 25% set aside at extremely low-income levels.
   b. Public funding must not result in upward rent pressures because such pressure displaces residents and businesses (i.e., no subsidizing local displacement).
III. Private Funding

THE DEMANDS: Private funding should increase economic mobility and neighborhood stability for lower income communities.

Private funding should facilitate opportunities for new local CBOs to emerge to serve as local advocates.

PROGRAMS TO ACHIEVE THEM:

1. Private funders should require concrete benefits for low-income residents in affordable housing, transportation, environmental, racial, ethnic and economic justice, and public health.

2. Private funders should account for equitable distribution of funding across geographical areas.

3. Private funders should require meaningful community engagement utilizing grassroots organizing and community-led planning that advances the priorities developed by low-income communities impacted by restoration.

4. Private funders should disavow community engagement for the purpose of bolstering preexisting ideas rather than ideas generated from the engagement itself.

5. Private funders should provide capacity building and operational funding for CBOs.

IV. Public Space

THE DEMANDS: Public Space must be accessible, welcoming to all and account for current and future needs of the community and the environment and health assets and benefits.

PROGRAMS TO ACHIEVE THEM:

1. Fund based on needs assessments to ensure investments in park-poor and disadvantaged communities.

2. Increase public safety investment that does not criminalize poverty and homelessness, such as security lighting and call boxes.

3. Public space improvement projects must assess and mitigate against gentrification/displacement impacts.

4. Legalize and support sidewalk vending.

5. Require planning and equitable funding for maintenance.

6. Include extensive community outreach and participatory design processes.
THE DEMANDS: Land use planning must be responsive to community needs and not to the aspirations of speculating developers.

Land use planning must achieve community-led planning.

Land use planning must mitigate real estate pressures.

Land use planning must avoid gentrification and displacement impacts.

PROGRAMS TO ACHIEVE THEM:

1. Plans and projects must be responsive to current community needs and an equitable blueprint for future growth based on the vision and priorities of current low-income stakeholders and stakeholders of color.

2. New development, zoning and land use planning must:
   a. Require covenanted affordable housing to the maximum extent allowed by law
   b. Preserve good job opportunities and diverse business enterprises
   c. Prioritize thriving wages
   d. Require environmental justice and health screening and analysis
   e. Mandate extensive, robust and well-marked River access for the surrounding communities.

3. New development must replace affordable and rent stabilized housing units removed or destroyed in the development process.

4. Land use planning policies and decisions should incorporate and be coordinated with targeted policies to preserve existing affordable and rent-stabilized housing, and expand and enforce tenant protections.

5. Require Culture In-Place preservation to ensure existing cultural assets are not replaced with gentrified versions.

6. Development agreements must contain community enforcement rights and compliance agreements with federal and state equal justice, civil justice, and environmental justice laws.
THE DEMANDS: Acquisitions and disposition of River adjacent property must be transparent and easily monitored by lay public members.

Acquisitions and disposition of River adjacent property must prioritize the preservation and expansion of public assets for accessible public benefit.

PROGRAMS TO ACHIEVE THEM:

1. Create and maintain publicly accessible online database that tracks parcel activity within a half mile of the River’s banks.

2. Lease or sell public land at below Fair Market Value to support development of permanently affordable housing.

3. Mandate a 25% set aside at extremely low-income levels for permanent affordable housing in all public acquisitions that contemplate housing.

4. Attach community benefits to sale of public land that promote affordable housing production and preservation, public health, jobs and recreation to the maximum extent allowed by law.

5. Plans and projects must be responsive to current community needs and grounded in an equitable blueprint for future growth based on the vision and priorities of current low-income stakeholders and stakeholders of color.
THE DEMAND: The River must be leveraged as an environmental equalizer to lift communities traditionally denied vital environmental assets.

PROGRAMS TO ACHIEVE THEM:

1. Create publicly accessible database with scheduled and anticipated remediation sites, with links to remediation evaluation.

2. Root revitalization and remediation decisions in:
   a. public health, environmental justice, access, equity and ecological science
   b. Early, extensive community engagement and education.

3. Require environmental remediation projects to:
   a. Assess possible gentrification and displacement risk and identify a path forward to mitigate against these impacts
   b. Assess and mitigate against gentrification and displacement impacts
   c. Advance River access
   d. Account for Watershed and River tributaries health
   e. Prioritize climate resiliency
   f. Include a needs assessment connected to existing adjacent communities
   g. Include high road employment and contracts standards and opportunities for local and disad vantaged residents and small, minority, women and veteran owned enterprises
   h. Include comprehensive and enforceable maintenance plan
   i. Incorporate soil ecology
   j. Be accounted for and scheduled as part of disposal and acquisition process, including prioritize green jobs training for disadvantaged workers.

4. Define sustainability to include affordability and access for low-income residents and residents of color.
River revitalization must engage, educate, and empower the people to alleviate structural inequalities and health disparities through a multi-racial, -ethnic, -cultural, and -lingual organizing, policy, and legal planning framework. This framework provides a solution to bring people together through coalition building, research, media, and advocacy. This solution will help overcome the problem of structural inequalities and disparities in the social determinants of health. Civil rights and environmental justice laws and principles provide a planning and compliance framework for agencies and the community to work together to protect equal access to publicly funded resources and alleviate unfair disparities. This framework applies, for example, to housing, health, public lands, jobs, climate justice, and other priorities. The framework includes five major elements:

I. Describe what is planned, in terms that the public understands.
II. Analyze the benefits and burdens on all people. This includes analyzing numerical disparities (in park access or health, for example), empirical studies and surveys, anecdotal evidence, demographic data, and GIS mapping. The data must be publicly available for independent analysis. Define standards to measure progress, allow for midcourse corrections, and hold officials accountable.
III. Analyze alternatives.
IV. Include people of color and low income people in the decision making process.
V. Develop an implementation plan to distribute benefits and burdens fairly, and avoid discrimination. This includes unjustified discriminatory impacts regardless of intent, as well as intentional discrimination.

This planning and implementation framework should take place early enough to meaningfully guide the decision making process. Additionally, requiring a compliance plan proactively as part of the planning and funding application is preferable to responding after the fact to complaints.