

## Our Priorities in Planning for the River

In what has felt like a single breath, the Lower Los Angeles River Revitalization Plan has been completed, just before the planning effort for the upper Los Angeles River and tributaries and the County's update to their 51 mile River Master Plan are set to kick off. FoLAR is excited to see the lower, upper River and some of its tributaries start to get the same resources that other sections of the River have seen in the recent past. However, these cascading planning efforts and how they all impact one another may seem confusing. As FoLAR continues our involvement and advocacy in the efforts shaping the River, we've taken the time to reflect on the issues and processes we hope are prioritized in these efforts. As published in a recent edition of our *River Reader* – the first comprehensive newsletter dedicated to Los Angeles River advocacy – we've gathered the lessons learned and observations made through our own experience as an organization involved in River planning from the beginning.

Over the past 30 years, FoLAR has sat on the advisory boards, committees, organized community, has shaped EIRs, and advocated for ecologically-minded and public access-focused plans on the Los Angeles River. We started with pushing the County to produce their first River Master Plan and most recently have helped lead community input for the Taylor Yards G2 River Park, the Lower River Revitalization Plan, and the ARBOR study. Here's what we know and what we expect from future planning processes:

1. Transparency – who's involved, how they were chosen, how decisions impacting the plan are made, and how priority outcomes are defined are all key components that shape community perception and involvement. A transparent process is not important simply for transparency's sake, but because the best plans are those that are shaped through well-informed collaboration. The City of LA recently held two well-attended public meetings: one where the top three teams competing for the Lincoln Height Jail Reuse project presented to the public and

the other where the top three teams competing for the Taylor Yards project presented to the public. Though these exercises can always be improved upon and perfected, these served as good examples of how to kick off a major planning/ design process for a project that encompasses a myriad of stakeholders.

2. An Inclusive Working Group – An insular planning process is a way of the past. The working group model exercised in the AB 530 working group (aka the Lower River Working Group) – though imperfect – has been relatively effective and can serve as a good model from which to learn and perfect. The stakeholder landscape of the River is even more complex than the governance that rules it. Communities along its banks are vastly diverse, as are their respective relationships to the River. As concerns fueled by displacement and gentrification continue to swirl throughout the region and along the River specifically, an inclusive planning process that starts with the very stakeholders who have worked in it and live along it is the most basic necessity in creating an equitable, informed, and well-rounded future for the River.
3. Comprehensive Community Engagement – Community engagement should begin with education aimed at strengthening public understanding of the process and desired outcomes. Education and engagement – from strategy to execution – should be led by local partners and those partners should be compensated for services rendered. The Lower River Working Group took important strides in testing out a model where local NGOs helped execute the community engagement strategy. As with all new models, there are important lessons learned. The digital platform provided for community members to provide input online rather than having to attend perfunctory public meetings was an innovative step. However, getting that platform updated and in front of a broad enough audience has proven challenging. Much of the anecdotal feedback we've heard from community members is that understanding the River as a potential public resource and imagining what the possibilities might be is an important context-setting step in ensuring effective and consistent engagement. Often times, community outreach is relatively low on the priority list, but a regionally impactful public resource like the River bears a community engagement strategy that is highly prioritized from the start.

4. Equity – This is a big word that means many things to many people. For us, it starts with inclusive planning as described above. But more tangibly - it means that the plans should provide a framework by which the existing River communities are preserved as they are improved – a consistent issue that has yet to be adequately addressed. We believe an equitable solution starts with an inclusive and transparent planning process, as described above. It continues with identifying the policies – from local hire to community amenities to affordable housing – that should be put in place as a part of the plan itself. The Lower River Working Group named this issue as a top priority in the planning process, however identifying and implementing the tools to address it has proven a challenge. We at FoLAR don't have the answers to this multi-faceted challenge, but are committed to helping figure it out and are hopeful that future planning efforts will provide tangible solutions.
  
5. Ecology and water quality – The two go hand in hand. Ecological restoration requires good water quality. Ecological restoration can also be a mitigation tool to help us *improve* water quality. The River was once a bastion of natural habitat and the source of life and culture for our nascent City. Now, surrounded by urbanity and concrete, restoration of its ancestral riparian ecology take concerted effort. The River offers our region a shot at connection to wildlife and nature unlike any other. While most of us in the River Movement are dedicated to a greener and healthier future for the River's ecosystem, we can foresee an outcome where ecology takes a backseat. We will be remaining dedicated to ensuring these plans prioritize nature as much as they do people and flood management. The ARBOR study was a great example in putting nature first and daring to commit to real ecological progress, though future plans should better balance ecological restoration with other priorities. It is the City of Los Angeles' River Revitalization Master Plan that best exemplifies a multi-beneficial approach.
  
6. Governance – Balkanized River governance has long hamstrung efficient progress. Planning efforts should endeavor not only to identify a governance solution, but should not be considered complete until that governance solution is implemented. In plans past, a JPA has been identified as the ideal governance solution, but little progress has been made in actually implementing one. To that end, any planning process that looks at the River should be led by a consortium of the jurisdictional agencies that currently govern the River. The ARBOR study was a good example of this as both the City of Los Angeles and Army Corps of Engineers

committed resources to the effort. In the end both agencies had buy in, both committed resources and felt invested ownership.

7. Implementation Funding – Last but not least. Plans are infamous dust-collectors on the shelves of bureaucracy in the absence of the financial resources required to implement them. A good plan will identify the funding sources and structure needed for implementation. The Lower River Working Group has an Implementation sub-committee tasked with exactly that. We will look for the strengths and weaknesses of that process next year.

Most of the priorities outlined above have been discussed, debated and planned for in the past. However, River stakeholders – us, our partner organizations, the community and government agencies – have all had enough trial and error throughout the various River planning processes that now seems like a immutably reasonable moment to really get it right. As we approach the coming planning processes with cautious optimism and a collaborative spirit, we will be keeping our collective ears to the ground and eyes wide open for all of the above.

This is what we expect. This is what we will advocate for.

We invite you to join us in it.

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*Friends of the Los Angeles River is a 501c3 nonprofit whose mission since 1986 has been to ensure a publicly accessible and ecologically sustainable Los Angeles River by inspiring River stewardship through community engagement, education, advocacy, and thought leadership. FOLAR is a leading powerful force guiding policy and connecting communities to the River, nationally respected as a leader in urban river revitalization with a membership of 35,000.*