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THE LOS ANGELES RIVER MASTER PLAN UPDATE: AN OVERVIEW

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On January 13, 2021, the County of Los Angeles unveiled its long-awaited update to the Los Angeles River Master Plan. The newly envisioned Master Plan aims to collectively guide the management of the entire 51-miles of the LA River over the next 25 years, all while allowing the various local entities along the River flexibility to address the concerns that most affect their communities. Not updated in nearly two decades, the County desperately needed to modernize the LA River Master Plan and include new and ongoing concerns such as climate change, homelessness, and open space accessibility. After four years of literature review, stakeholder engagement, community meetings, watershed studies, and design collaboration, the LA River Master Plan now highlights a pathway forward through a world that cannot change past actions. By acknowledging the history of channelization and the diversity that surrounds the River, the Master Plan seeks to continue the overarching objective of floodplain safety but in a compassionate and inclusive manner that better aligns with community needs.

The LA River spans the entire LA County, beginning in Canoga Park and traveling east, then south until it hits the Pacific Ocean in Long Beach. The watershed itself extends farther north into Angeles National Forest and the San Gabriel Mountains, providing hundreds of thousands of acre-feet of water per year to Los Angeles County. However, due to the vast amount of water that flows through the LA River annually, the system was dammed and channelized after the devastating 1938 floods. Today, both LA County Flood Control and US Army Corps of Engineers manage various portions of the LA River, serving and protecting the one million people that live within a one mile radius of the River.

As with any large group of stakeholders, determining a mechanism to cultivate conversation and embrace diversity cannot fall to an engineered solution. For decades, native tribes have been ignored, minority populations have been disenfranchised, and homelessness has become evermore present. Previous master plans and regional guides rarely recognized any of these groups or addressed their concerns, leading to a deepening mistrust between communities and local governments and a continued ignorance of Angeleno culture. The 2020 LA River Master Plan was crafted with the community in mind, building upon dozens of steering committee meetings, tribal consultations, and stakeholder engagement events. Unlike its predecessors, the new Master Plan embraces



Figure 1 The Los Angeles River in Long Beach, California. Photo taken by the article's author, Kayla Kelly-Slatten.

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diversity, recognizing that communities are better equipped to implement best management practices so long as they have the proper tools.

The updated LA River Master Plan comprises of three main documents: the Master Plan, which provides the background of the LA River, outlines the engagement process, and lists the nine goals and their implementation along the River; the Design Guidelines, which provide a “kit of parts” to help communities meet the goals as outlined in the Master Plan; and the Technical Appendix, which contextualizes and explains the River Rulers, hydrology and hydraulics studies, and various design components. While the three documents accumulate to over one thousand pages, they provide a well-rounded approach to managing a vast riverine system.

At the apex of the Master Plan is the goal of flood risk reduction and improved resiliency, solidifying the County’s continued concern of maintaining a safe and secure River, particularly in a changing climate. Listed as Goal One, the flood resiliency objective begins with an overview of the flood risk reduction need along the LA River, utilizing a version of the River Ruler tool found throughout the Master Plan to depict the various levels of need in an easy manner. The “need” depends upon the channel capacity, the floodplain capacity, sea level rise, and critical infrastructure/facility density. The overview provides a necessary foundation to the implementation of the goal through several actions and methods. While flood risk reduction relies heavily on the expertise of County and Federal engineers and managers through improved mapping, updated models, and necessary retrofitting to the gray infrastructure, the Master Plan acknowledges how surrounding communities can and should partake in flood risk reduction practices like multi-language signage installation, sediment and invasive species removal from stormwater systems, flood insurance education, and emergency preparedness exercises.

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Truly, the LA River Master Plan does not contain any groundbreaking floodplain management actions. However, what makes the Master Plan unique in its approach to floodplain management is its transparent recognition that there is not one solution to a resilient future. The Master Plan acknowledges that all opportunities to improve the LA River can and should be viewed through the lens of flood risk reduction and improved resiliency. It then proceeds to provide case studies, types of projects, and guidelines to help governments and their constituents develop local frameworks and implementation strategies. For example, project templates range from extra-small consistent wayfinding and signage to extra-large platform parks and greenspaces, providing a diverse array of opportunities to bridge communities together via the River. Additionally, the Master Plan reflects on the channelization of the LA River, addressing calls from various stakeholders to naturalize the River. While naturalization of the entire 51-mile River may be the best ecological solution to flood risk, the displacement of millions of residents, businesses, and infrastructure is neither feasible nor just, particularly as LA County struggles to provide for its homeless population amid an ongoing pandemic that threatens the livelihoods of thousands. Through its user-friendly text, diagrams, and designs, the 2020 LA River Master Plan brings modernity and updated data to the average layperson, ensuring that engineers and landscape architects are no longer the only voices that guide the future of the LA River.

For more information or to read and comment on the 2020 LA River Master Plan, go to <http://larivermasterplan.org>.



Figure 2 One of the many pumping facilities along the Los Angeles River. Photo taken by the article's author, Kayla Kelly-Slatten.



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