

Memorandum

To : The Conservancy
The Advisory Committee

Date: June 1, 2020

From :  Joseph T. Edmiston, FAICP, Hon. ASLA, Executive Director

Subject: **Agenda Item 8: Consideration of resolution approving and adopting the Upper Los Angeles River and Tributaries Revitalization Plan, as recommended by the Upper Los Angeles River and Tributaries Working Group.**

Staff Recommendation: That the Conservancy adopt the attached resolution approving and adopting the Upper Los Angeles River and Tributaries Revitalization Plan, as recommended by the Upper Los Angeles River and Tributaries Working Group.

Legislative Authority: Public Resources Code Sections 33220.

Background: The legislation establishing the Upper Los Angeles River and Tributaries (ULART) Working Group, Assembly Bill 466 (AB 466), Chapter 341 of the Statutes of 2017, requires a master planning process for a Revitalization Plan (Plan). Legislation also requires that the Plan address the unique and diverse needs of the Upper Los Angeles River, Pacoima Wash, Tujunga Wash, Verdugo Wash, and any additional tributary waterway that the working group determines to be necessary, which prompted the addition of the Aliso Canyon Wash and the Burbank Western Channel, as determined by the working group. Subsequent legislation, Senate Bill 1126 (SB 1126), Chapter 895, Statutes of 2018, extended the deadline of the plan and added an additional tributary, the Arroyo Seco. The revitalization plan shall require a master planning process that includes community engagement and a prioritization of disadvantaged communities. Legislation stated that the plan shall be consistent with and enhance, and may be incorporated into plans that include, but are not limited to, the County of Los Angeles' River Master Plan. In December 2017, the Santa Monica Mountains Conservancy (Conservancy) granted funds to the Mountains Recreation and Conservation Authority (MRCA) to assist the Conservancy to administer the Working Group and develop the revitalization plan.

Project History

The ULART planning process began in August 2018 and as the project progressed, the parameters established by the Working Group were modified and defined through extensive discussion and review of opportunities. On multiple occasions this was an expansion of scope, leading to further study, additional work products, and adjustments to the project timeline. The 23 member Working Group convened monthly for a period of 20 months through 23 publicly held working group and committee meetings, in addition to 10 community meetings to gather feedback and develop a comprehensive, collaborative, and inclusive planning process.

Altogether throughout the duration of this process, more than 1,100 public comments were provided during plan development and the public comment period. Two committees were identified by the working group - People and Recreation and Water and the Environment to provide feedback throughout the process through the lens of each of the two broad categories. These committees met 14 times. The meetings were held in a variety of locations throughout the study area, and each meeting included time for public comments. The plan's mission statement, goals, and objectives were developed to ensure that revitalization efforts included in the Plan served the needs of the river communities while improving quality of life.

The planning process included three phases: Inventory and Analysis, Concept Development, and Plan Preparation. The MRCA partnered with seven non-governmental organizations (NGO), who provided project outreach and engagement activities throughout the process in all three phases. NGO partners worked in distinct areas that were geographically diverse throughout the ULART study area. NGOS underwent outreach in a variety of innovative ways, including visiting farmer's markets, schools, community events, etc., to conduct in person engagement. Their outstanding efforts combined to share informational awareness of the plan, as well as solicit input and feedback which went toward plan development. NGO partners also conducted outreach and support for the ten community meetings and distributed information about the ULART plan thru their social media outlets. The seven NGO partners were: Sacred Places Institute for Indigenous Peoples, River LA, Pacoima Beautiful & Friends of the Los Angeles River, The Mulholland Institute, The River Project, and The William C. Velasquez Institute.

Plan Overview

The Plan's framework intentionally mirrored the process used for its sister document, *The Lower Los Angeles River Revitalization Plan* (2018) AB 530, so that both documents can be incorporated into the related Los Angeles River Master Plan Update (LARMP). The LARMP is currently being updated by Los Angeles County Public Works for the entire 51 miles of the Los Angeles River main stem, but does not include tributaries. The LARMP is a comprehensive update from an earlier 1996 version and is planned to be completed in late 2020.

The Revitalization Plan comprises Volume 1, with technical appendices found in Volume 2. Within Volume 1, an Executive Summary briefly outlines the study area, project planning process, as well as an overall review of project opportunities. Chapter 1 details existing watershed conditions, native nations within the planning area, history, literature reviewed, and context of the relevant regional watershed plans. Chapter 2 outlines the planning process, needs, and community outreach and engagement efforts. Chapter 3 contains all of the 344 project opportunity areas identified during the study, as well as bundles of projects that were aggregated into design areas (see attachments, pages 3-4). In all, 11 design areas were studied in more detail, and these are presented as detailed concepts and renderings in the Plan. Nine Project Elements are described as templates and can be generally applied to the 300+ opportunities that did not fall within a design area. Chapter 3 also includes an extensive amount

of Resiliency Metrics which quantify the climate benefits of implementing the proposed improvements (see attachments, pages 5-7). Finally, Chapter 4 presents an implementation and next steps guide for how the Plan can be used and implemented.

Public Review

Throughout the ULART plan development process, staff ensured multiple opportunities for public participation and review. From hosting community meetings at family friendly, accessible and no-cost innovative, exciting locations to conducting Working Group meetings at public locations throughout the watershed. In the summer of 2019, MRCA released an online webtool which allowed the public to view and provide comments on opportunity areas. Viewers were able to see opportunity areas and recommend additional new opportunities, with the option of uploading photos and documents for the project planning team to utilize. This first webtool was available for approximately two months. A second webtool to facilitate review of the draft Plan was available for public use starting September 2019. Chapters 1 and 2 of the full Draft Plan were released for review by December 2019. Both Volumes 1 and 2 of the full Draft Plan (in English and Spanish) were available for review and comment online via the project's website at: <https://www.upperlariver.org/>. Physical copies of the full Draft Plan were made available to the public at MRCA's Cypress Park office. During this review period, MRCA staff also coordinated two in person Listening Sessions, held in English and Spanish, to offer the public the opportunity to view the plan and submit comments in person. Laptops and ipads were made available for viewing the plan as well. Staff were available to answer questions and help direct people to sections in the plan as needed. The public comment period closed on January 21, 2020.

In all, during the public comment period more than 500 comments were received for the draft Plan via the online document tool (Konveio), written letters, e-mails, verbal correspondence, and at the Listening Sessions. The project planning team compiled and addressed each comment within a comment response log (see Volume 2, Chapter G). Comments received ranged from overarching issues to specific details. Each comment is noted in the response log, and whenever feasible appropriately addressed within the Plan.

Given the Upper Los Angeles River and Tributaries' Working Group mission statement, goals and objectives (see attachments, pages 1-2), which guided Plan development, as well as the opportunity and design areas identified throughout the upper Los Angeles River watershed, this effort is consistent with the strategic objectives in Propositions 84, 1 and 68 which collectively include:

Protect and restore urban watershed health to improve storage capacity, forest health, protection of life and property, stormwater resource management, and greenhouse gas reduction;

Improve access to open space and passive recreation for all communities and promote healthy lifestyles;

Improve habitat quality, quantity, and connectivity through creation, enhancement, preservation, and restoration projects;

Connect open space with a network of trails;

Promote those actions necessary to protect and allow continued use and enjoyment of natural resources;

Maintain and improve flood protection through natural and non-structural systems and ecosystem restoration;

Water Conservation, Treatment and Improvement Projects;

Establish riverfront greenways to cleanse water;

Optimize water resources by improving the quality of surface and ground water and enhance ground water recharge, to reduce dependence on imported water;

Encourage multi-objective planning and projects;

Use science as a basis for planning;

Involve the public through interpretation and outreach programs; Restoration of river parkways and urban river greenways;

Projects within the San Fernando Valley that protect or enhance the Los Angeles River watershed and its tributaries or headwaters; and

Watershed protection and restoration activities in the San Gabriel and Los Angeles River watersheds are consistent with the San Gabriel and Los Angeles River Watershed and Open Space Plan (“Common Ground Plan”) as adopted by the San Gabriel and Lower Los Angeles Rivers and Mountains Conservancy and the Santa Monica Mountains Conservancy.

It is estimated that over 10,000 work hours were needed to complete this effort, including preliminary inventory analysis, comment compilation and development for the final *Upper Los Angeles River and Tributaries Revitalization Plan*.

Next Steps

The Upper Los Angeles River and Tributaries (ULART) Revitalization Plan was completed, approved, and adopted by the Working Group on April 16, 2016 via a teleconference (Zoom) meeting. As part of the Working Group's resolution, the group recommended the approval and adoption of the Plan to the Conservancy. Upon approval from the Conservancy, the Plan shall then be submitted to the state and legislative committees, meeting the current grant term and in compliance with the legislative deadline. On-going work will consist of continued staffing and facilitation of the Working Group, which also includes ongoing online engagement and plan information dissemination. The MRCA has proposed that the Working Group to continue to meet, up to twice a year, through June 2023 to oversee Plan progress and implementation. A provision mandating the continuance of the ULART Working Group will be included in the upcoming Natural Resources Trailer Bill. The proposed legislative language would also add a seat to the Conservancy Advisory Committee, to ensure ongoing representation for the ULART Working Group, which the ULART chair would assume.

CEQA Analysis

The Revitalization Plan is a feasibility and planning study and does not, in itself, authorize any project. Adoption of the Revitalization Plan does not have a legally binding effect on later activities. Section 15262 of the CEQA Guidelines states that a project involving only feasibility or planning studies for possible future actions does not require the preparation of an EIR or Negative Declaration. Consideration of environmental factors is still required, and this is provided by the Plan's Resiliency Metrics. Further authority for this Statutory Exemption can be found in Sections 21083, 21102 and 21150 of the Public Resources Code.