



# Restoring the L.A. River for All Angelenos

*Advocates who have fought for years to bring back this beleaguered urban waterway are joining local communities of color to ensure that new development doesn't equal displacement.*

December 26, 2019 [Jeff Turrentine](#)



*The Los Angeles River Lane Barden*

As it winds its way through the urban landscape, the Los Angeles River performs a vital service for Angelenos as an important means of flood control. During periods of heavy rain, this mostly channelized, 51-mile-long waterway is capable of depositing more than [10.8 million gallons](#) of runoff into the Pacific Ocean every minute. Now, after many decades of neglect, portions of the river are undergoing a long-awaited and much-needed restoration designed to improve riparian

health, preserve and strengthen wildlife habitat, and naturally treat the stormwater runoff that flows through the channel during extreme rain events.

Supporters of the plan to clean up the river have simultaneously sought to transform it into a genuine community asset, seeking not only a healthier and more resilient L.A. River but also a more beautiful and welcoming one. But as excitement over the waterway's resuscitation has



risen, so too have housing costs and land speculation.

Residents of river-adjacent communities—many of them historically Asian-American and Latino—are concerned that the neighborhoods they’ve called home for generations are now under threat from developers whose projects are primarily geared toward the wealthy. The issue is playing out amid the worst homelessness crisis the city has seen in decades, with nearly [60,000 people living on the streets](#) and some 600,000 Los Angeles County residents spending [90 percent or more of their income on housing costs](#).

Given these new realities, as they go about restoring the river, “both the City and County of Los Angeles need to prioritize safety, safeguard everyday quality of life, lessen collateral displacement of long-term residents—principally renters—and prioritize preservation of area residential characteristics,” says David de la Torre of the [Elysian Valley Neighborhood Watch](#).



*David de la Torre of Elysian Valley Neighborhood Watch Ricardo Palavecino*

[Damon Nagami](#), a senior attorney with NRDC who works with the Southern California Ecosystems Project, echoes this message. “For

many years, when restoring the L.A. River was more of a far-off vision, advocates’ main goal was to convince our civic leaders that returning the river to a more natural state, restoring its ecological functions, and giving the public access to the river were all both possible and desirable,” he says. “Through years of perseverance, we finally achieved that goal. But now that there’s momentum behind and public resources aimed at river restoration, profiteering developers are horning in with megaprojects that are threatening to displace folks in low-income communities of color.”

As part of the [Los Angeles Regional Open Space and Affordable Housing](#) collaborative, NRDC’s advocates have emphasized that any new development must include public, open green space along the riverfront and must protect critical river and watershed functions. “The first two large development projects proposed along the river, north of downtown L.A., don’t do any of these things,” Nagami says, so his team is mounting a campaign to oppose them. One of these proposed projects, a [419-unit residential complex](#) with only 35 units set aside as affordable housing, would dramatically increase traffic and tailpipe emissions in the surrounding Glassell Park and Atwater Village neighborhoods. It would also disrupt habitat restoration efforts and place commercial development atop seven acres of riverside land that the city had previously envisioned as part of a contiguous public park. The other proposed project, [a mixed-use complex in L.A.’s Chinatown](#) that would contain 920 upscale residential units, has already led to reports of landlords harassing and even evicting long-term neighborhood residents, as development causes land values—and market rates for rental apartments—to increase.



*The site plan for the Elysian Park Lofts project- Los Angeles City Planning*

As community advocates press the city to ensure that any development along a restored L.A. River is both sustainable and equitable, they are aware that getting local buy-in on projects in the planning phase is key. That's the purpose behind the monthly meetings of a group known as the [Alliance of River Communities](#) (ARC). The group convenes to update residents on the status of these projects and to give members of the affected communities a chance to ask questions of city officials, engineers, planners, and developers. At [the group's November meeting](#), an otherwise uncontentious presentation on two recent downtown projects grew heated once the event was opened up for audience Q&A. Representatives from the city government were asked pointed questions about the projects' potential to displace residents—including the large proportion of elderly, low-income renters in Chinatown—as well as the insufficiency of

current affordable-housing mandates to address the city's housing crisis.

In discussion forums like these and in more radical street protests, the stakes are clear. During the "Days of Rage" protest against gentrification that took place in the Elysian Valley neighborhood in early December, residents marched with signs like "Our Community Is Not 4 Sale" and "Evictions Create Homelessness." They were brought together by the group Frogtown Residents Opposing Gentrification, which uses the neighborhood's nickname, rooted in memories of the [western toads](#) that used to traverse local streets on their way to breed in the L.A. River. The moniker is a reminder of the community's close ties to the waterway in their backyard—one residents hope they'll get the chance to reconnect with one day soon.