

**Chapter 2:**

# **Community Access**

## **to the Los Angeles River**

# Introduction

## Definition and Benefits

Historically, access to much of the Los Angeles River (River) has been blocked by chain-link fences, unwelcoming signage, trash, and other signs of neglect. This divides communities, disrupts transportation networks, and impedes wildlife. While some areas along the River are technically accessible, they can be hidden from public view or unsafe. This chapter focuses on physical markers, entryways, visual cues, or other greenway elements to help people find their way towards, along, across, and away from the River and its amenities safely. Examples of ways to access the River (access points) include River gates, street ends, stairs, ramps, bridges, and pocket parks (small-scale parks developed on small or irregular pieces of land). New and existing River revitalization projects often include the development of access points in conjunction with other features and amenities, like parks and pathways.

**INSERT Figure 4.1.1:** *Example of restricted LA River access on the West Bank in South Gate.*

*Credit: Henry McCann*

**INSERT Figure 4.1.1G** *Restricted LA River access on the north bank at Wilbur Avenue in Reseda.*

*Image Credit: Andrew Pasillas*

**Insert Figure “extra”:** Decorative River gates such as the one at Maywood Riverfront Park serve as public art, visual and physical cues for access to the LA River.

**INSERT Figure 4.1.1C:** *River gates that can easily lock function to protect visitors during storms*

*Image Credit: Andrew Pasillas*

**INSERT Figure 4.1.1A:** *Stairs leading to the River’s bank are common points of access when neighborhood streets are higher in elevation.*

**INSERT Figure 4.1.1B:** *Pocket Parks such as the Sunnynook River Park are functional and aesthetic greenway elements that effectively serve as access points.*

*Image Credit: Andrew Pasillas*

**INSERT Figure 4.1.1D:** *Physical markers such as this sign at the North Valleyheart Riverwalk in Studio City make clear the point of entry and access to and from the LA River.*

*Image Credit: Jimmy Tran*

**INSERT Figure 4.1.1E:** Access to the River may not always be in the form of a gate or stairs and can be informal entrances.

*Image Credit: Andrew Pasillas*

Access to the River benefits people in many ways including:

- **Mobility:** Easy, obvious access to the LA River and its amenities allows pedestrians, bicyclists, and equestrians to move effectively and efficiently within and along the greenway. Neighborhood access points are doorways to the River, allowing entry and exit. They also connect people to street networks, public transportation, green open spaces, and community destinations.
- **Safety:** Secure access points bring people to the River. It increases user traffic, awareness and the number of “eyes on the River”. This can help to deter crime and illicit activity. Identifiable and closable River gates can also protect visitors during storms and flooding events.
- **Aesthetics:** Well designed, landscaped, and attractive access points draw people to use the River greenway and its amenities (e.g., bike path, park, etc.).
- **Economic and Social Benefits:** LA River access points allow for easy connections to and from shopping districts, schools, parks, and other social and economic centers on both banks of the waterway. Increased accessibility to and from the River greenway boosts the likelihood of social and economic exchanges. For example, the LA River bisects residential and shopping districts in Studio City, Van Nuys, and Sherman Oaks.
- **Environmental Benefits:** Access projects that incorporate native or drought-tolerant landscaping and storm water capture strategies can protect the River greenway from debris and contaminants as well as reduce the need for extensive irrigation and water use.

## **Importance: Current Conditions along the Los Angeles River**

In the last two decades, many River access points, especially for bike paths along the lower half of the River, were completed by the Los Angeles County Department of Public Works. They provide important connections along the greenway. Access to the River at street ends and pocket parks are signature examples of access points in the upper half of the River. However, there are still many opportunities on both banks (upper and lower) to increase access to the River and to improve and maintain existing access points. Many older street ends and River entrances are still unattractive chain-link fences, do not have clear signs to mark directions, and lack landscaping.

## **Current Plans**

There are relatively few guidelines regarding access point development due to their broad classification in the County of Los Angeles's LA River Master Plan (LARMP), the City of Los Angeles's *Los Angeles River Revitalization Master Plan* (LARRMP), and the City of Long Beach's RiverLink plan. In addition, there is no universal definition of an access point. In general, increasing public access to the LA River is a common goal for River projects but specific recommendations on how to create or improve them vary.

The County's plan sets guidelines for landscaping, signage, gates, and fences along the River, which helps to improve the form, function, and safety of access points.

The City of LA's plan does not define access points but states that providing safe access to the River should be a goal of River revitalization efforts. The plan makes recommendations for green street enhancements, gateways, and the use of public art at access points to enhance River identity and connect neighborhoods to the River. Long Beach's *RiverLink* plan defines access points or gateways as "points where a visitor begins the journey along a pathway towards a connection or destination" (Long Beach *RiverLink*, p. 19).

**INSERT Figure 4.1.4:** *RiverLink plan proposal for access points along the LA River (shown as hexagons)*

*Image Credit: Long Beach RiverLink*

## **Moving from Planning to Project Implementation: Learning from Case Studies**

This chapter profiles projects that provide effective access to and from the River. Each differs in scale and location and together represent a diverse range of River access types. Some of them improve access points while others create new ones. Many access points, including the selected examples, were completed by agencies and organizations working collaboratively. These projects were often a component of larger River revitalization efforts. Most River projects currently in development, such as LA Riverfront Park and the Zev Yaroslavy L.A. River Greenway Trail (featured in Chapter 4: Pathways) will include creating or improving multiple access points.

Duck Park, introduced first, is an abridged example of a small budget project with a big impact in the Elysian Valley. The remaining three case studies are examples of larger projects and are explained in more detail. We examine each project's origins, goals, and timeline; project proponents and community collaborators; site selection and design; cost and funding; permitting and use agreements; as well as operations and maintenance. This chapter ends with guidance for pursuing similar projects, summarizing best practices and lessons learned from the case studies. A summary of the defining elements of each project is shown below:

### **Creating Access through Duck Park**

Location: City of Los Angeles, Elysian Valley neighborhood  
Form and Scale: Converted unsightly neighborhood street end into a pleasant pocket park (less than 0.1 acres) with native habitat  
Key Benefits: New access to the River, scenic resting stop, access to nature  
Keywords: Low-budget, small-scale, ducks, passive recreation  
Lead Proponents: North East Trees and the Mountains and Recreation Conservation Authority  
Completed: 2004

### **Creating Access along North Valleyheart Riverwalk**

Location: City of Los Angeles, Studio City neighborhood: Between Fulton and Coldwater Canyon Avenues  
Form and Scale: Transformed a half-mile restricted access maintenance pathway into a publicly accessible recreational trail and access point to the LA River  
Key Benefits: New access to the River, including ramps for those with limited mobility, improved native landscaping, recreational and educational opportunities, public art installation  
Keywords: Community-driven, local artist, Americans with Disability Act compliance, long-term maintenance, volunteer  
Lead Proponents: Village Gardeners of the Los Angeles River and Los Angeles County Flood Control District  
Completed: 2014

### **Improving Access in South Gate**

Location: City of South Gate: Hollydale Park and Southern Avenue  
Form and Scale: Enhanced pedestrian, bicyclist, and equestrian access to and from the bike path along the LA River  
Key Benefits: Improved access to the River from Hollydale Park, improved access from Southern Avenue to and from the bike path along the River, new restroom access along the River  
Keywords: Butterfly gates, existing park, industrial street end, equestrian, restroom renovations, improved access, rod iron gates  
Lead Proponents: City of South Gate and San Gabriel and Lower Los Angeles River Mountains and Rivers Conservancy  
Completed: 2008

## **Connecting Street Ends to the Elysian Valley Bikeway**

Location: City of Los Angeles, Elysian Valley neighborhood: Gatewood, Fernleaf, and Dallas Streets

Form and Scale: New and enhanced access to the River and bike path at three neighborhood street ends

Key Benefits: New and enhanced community access to the River and bike path, improved storm water management

Keywords: Storm water best management practices, permitting, design, Green Streets Standards, street ends, cost-effective

Lead Proponents: Mountains and Recreation Conservation Authority and City of Los Angeles

Completed: 2014

## Creating Access through Duck Park

In the Elysian Valley, a quiet pocket park known as Duck Park is located along the west bank of the Los Angeles River at the end of Meadowvale Street. The park serves as a rest stop and an important connection for the surrounding neighborhood to the River. It is located along the 2.5-mile Elysian Valley Bikeway on the west bank of the River, starting at Fletcher Drive and terminating at Egret Park by Interstate 5.

**INSERT Figure 4.2.1.1:** *Duck Park's location along the Elysian Valley Bikeway*  
Image Credit: Jimmy Tran

Various shades of green are visible beyond the gate at the street end. From the neighborhood, visitors are guided alongside native plants, past a shaded bench, down decorative stone steps, and to the edge of the Elysian Valley Bikeway. Beyond the path is an iconic view of the River which includes plants, flowing water, a soft-earthen River bottom, and different types of birds. The pocket park was designed and constructed by North East Trees, a nonprofit with a history of transforming dead ends into pleasant green spaces along the River. Duck Park is a model for River projects that seek to provide small but meaningful access to the River.

**INSERT Figure 4.2.1.5:** *View of Duck Park from Meadowvale Street*  
Image Credit: North East Trees

**INSERT Figure 4.2.1.2:** *Looking at the LA River and its bike path from the decorative stone steps to Duck Park*  
Image Credit: Andrew Pasillas

**INSERT Figure 4.2.1.3:** *View of the ducks from the pocket park*  
Image Credit: Andrew Pasillas

### Why Duck Park Matters

Through revitalization of the River, a series of stories has emerged documenting the unwavering commitment of local communities, organizations, and agencies to transform the unpleasant flood control channel into a beautiful space usable by everyone. Duck Park's creation is one of these stories, beginning with the neighborhood's need to access the River and concluding with a beautiful park at a street end. Duck Park gives visitors a glimpse of what the River was and will be in the future through its timeless design and connection to the network of River greenway projects.

### Origins, Goals, Costs, and Funding

In the early 2000s, Elysian Valley residents saw the advent of River revitalization projects and wanted the benefits they witnessed from these projects brought to their neighborhood. Locals wanted safe and easy entrances and exits along the nearby bike

path, but many streets on the River's west bank ended with chain-link fences and no access to the River.

**INSERT Figure 4.2.1.4:** *Meadowvale Street end before Duck Park's Construction*  
Image Credit: North East Trees

Like they had in the past, North East Trees and the Mountains Recreation and Conservation Authority (MRCA) collaborated to develop the LA River Bikeway Improvements Project, which sought to enhance access along the proposed future bike path, restore native habitats, and create two new pocket parks (Duck Park and Crystal Street Bicycle Park in 2004 and 2005, respectively) with amenities such as bike racks, benches, and signage.

Project proponents engaged the community, created designs, obtained permits from the Los Angeles County Flood Control District, and managed the construction of Duck Park. Former Los Angeles City Councilmember Eric Garcetti was a key advocate of the project, helping North East Trees reach stakeholders, seek feedback, and ensure continued support for River revitalization efforts.

The total cost for the improvements was \$263,000, a relatively low budget for River projects of any scale. The Los Angeles County Regional Park and Open Space District provided \$225,000 for the entire project, including Duck Park's administration, design and planning, construction, and community outreach. North East Trees contributed \$38,000 for additional site amenities, materials, and volunteer labor.

## **Designing Duck Park**

The specific design goals of Duck Park were both aesthetic and functional in nature. Duck Park acts as both a park and an access point for the community adjacent to the River. The placement of rocks and boulders, the drought-tolerant plant palette, and the use of recycled materials for site amenities creates a green oasis—a North East Trees project trademark. The design of the River gate denotes wavy patterns to represent the River and encourage residents to explore the small park at the end of a neighborhood street.

As a scenic resting stop, Duck Park draws people to the River not only from the adjacent neighborhood, but also from the street and both directions of the bike path. As bicyclists and pedestrians pass, they can sit, relax, and view the LA River under the shade of Sycamore trees. Visitors stepping off the paved bike path find a small trail that leads to the park's iconic stone steps. At the top of the stairs, a shaded bench awaits before the trail guides visitors towards the gate and back onto the neighborhood street.

**INSERT Figure 4.2.1.6:** *Iconic decorative stone steps leading to Duck Park*  
Image Credit: North East Trees

The high visibility of the park helps promote a safe environment for all users. While Duck Park is small, it opens access to and from the River and bike path.

## Creating Access along North Valleyheart Riverwalk

A half mile of revitalized greenway sits on the north bank of the Los Angeles River along North Valleyheart Drive in the City of Los Angeles’s Studio City neighborhood. This recently completed project transformed a maintenance path with restricted access to a public recreational trail with improved fencing, native drought-tolerant landscaping, irrigation, and educational and interpretive signs. The project was the result of a partnership between the Los Angeles County Flood Control District (LACFCD) and the nonprofit organization Village Gardeners of the Los Angeles River (Village Gardeners). The North Valleyheart Riverwalk (Riverwalk) accomplishes many of the goals articulated in the *Los Angeles River Master Plan*: to develop a continuous greenway along the River, improve water quality, provide recreational opportunities, restore natural habitat, and increase access to the River.

**INSERT Figure 4.2.2.5:** *Location of the Riverwalk (blue line) along the LA River*  
Image Credit: Jimmy Tran

**INSERT Figure 4.2.2.1:** *View of the Riverwalk looking east from Fulton Avenue*  
Image Credit: Jimmy Tran

### Origins, Goals, and Timeline

Since 1998, the Village Gardeners have maintained a section of the LACFCD’s property on both banks of the River through LA County’s Adopt-A-Riverbank program.<sup>1</sup> In 2008, at an Earth Day event, the Village Gardeners were inspired to start a project to beautify the northern bank of their greenway, restore its natural habitat, and improve access to the LA River. The idea, named “North Valleyheart Riverwalk Project,” was supported by local community members, neighborhood councils, and elected officials.

**INSERT Figure 4.2.2.2:** *Concept rendering for the the Riverwalk*  
Image Credit: Kathryn Cerra Associates

The Village Gardeners worked with the landscape architecture firm, Kathryn Cerra Associates, to design a River access point with “Steps to the Riverwalk”—a staircase covered with a decorative arbor structure that would lead to the River’s bank.

**INSERT Figure 4.2.2.3:** *Design concept for the “Stairs to the Riverwalk”*  
Image Credit: Kathryn Cerra Associates

The County considered their design proposal, developed a *Project Concept Report*, and conducted several site visits to assess the feasibility and to provide a conceptual overview of the Riverwalk’s new features and amenities.

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<sup>1</sup> The County is currently revamping the Adopt-A-Riverbank program. As of the release of this report, the program was no longer active.

The Village Gardeners needed the County to support the project both financially and because it was located on County land. The project was consistent with the goals of the *Los Angeles River Master Plan* to preserve, enhance, and restore environmental resources in and along the River and in 2011, the County voiced their support for the project and their intention to move forward.<sup>2</sup> Project management and development was tasked to LACFCD, while the Village Gardeners provided design feedback and continued to engage the community. LACFCD proposed to extend the project scope to create a recreational trail, educational signage, and to provide pedestrian access at Fulton, Ethel, and Coldwater Canyon Avenues.

<b>Timeline</b>	<b>Date</b>
Los Angeles County Department of Public Works holds Earth Day Event along the River; inspiring Village Gardeners to beautify the greenway between Fulton and Coldwater Canyon Avenues.	April 2008
Village Gardeners seek support from Studio City community groups and LA Council Districts for their “Valleyheart Riverwalk” proposal, which includes revitalizing both banks of the River.	Mid-2008
Village Gardeners present their proposal to the LA County Department of Public Works which commits to support it.	Late-2008
The County develops a Project Concept Report and conducts several site visits to assess feasibility and to develop a conceptual overview of the Riverwalk’s new features and amenities.	2009-2011
LA County Department of Public Works and LACFCD prioritize implementation of just the North Valleyheart Riverwalk as an LA River Master Plan Project.	2011
Project breaks ground on construction.	July 2013
Village Gardeners conduct community outreach to find and support local mural artist.	Late-2013
Construction is complete; installation of the Steelhead Trout Mural begins.	Winter 2013/2014
Public opening.	July 2014

**Table XX:** *Implementation Timeline for North Valleyheart Riverwalk Project*

<sup>2</sup> LA County Letter of Support 2. (2008). Retrieved from <http://bit.ly/1YDFTEK>

## Project Proponents and Community Collaborations

Village Gardeners of the Los Angeles River is an all-volunteer, nonprofit organization dedicated to maintaining, restoring, and beautifying the LA River between Fulton and Coldwater Canyon Avenues, in Studio City and Sherman Oaks. Their mission is to lead the community to enhance River greenway conservation, ecology, and restoration through partnerships with schools, community organizations, and government agencies. They foster a communal commitment to the rebirth of the River while respecting necessary regional flood control management.

**INSERT Figure 4.2.2.42:** *Village Gardeners sweeping street debris near the Riverwalk.*  
*Image Credit: Village Gardeners of the Los Angeles River*

The County oversees the progress of LA River projects in accordance with the *Los Angeles River Master Plan* while planning and implementation is generally assigned to LACFCD. Its main goal is to provide flood protection, water conservation, and recreational enhancements.

<i>Stakeholder</i>	<i>Role</i>
Village Gardeners of the Los Angeles River	Led organization, developed project goals and proposal, engaged community, maintained project site
Los Angeles County Department of Public Works	Political support, oversight of project in accordance to <i>Los Angeles River Master Plan</i>
Los Angeles County Flood Control District	Funded and managed project implementation, including design, construction, project site maintenance
Los Angeles County 3 <sup>rd</sup> Supervisorial District: Zev Yaroslavsky	Provided political support and financial donations to create the Steelhead Trout Mural <sup>3</sup>
Studio City Residents Association	
Sherman Oaks Neighborhood Council	

<sup>3</sup> This is not an exhaustive list of supporters: those highlighted were involved throughout the community engagement process.

Los Angeles City Council Districts 2 & 4	
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**Table XX:** Summary list of the key stakeholders and their roles in the development of the Riverwalk

Translating LA River project plans into action requires the support of stakeholders—those who are impacted by the project. Before asking for County support, Village Gardeners did extensive outreach in Studio City and Sherman Oaks, attending numerous neighborhood council meetings and speaking with property owners along the north bank of the Riverwalk. The community was generally supportive. However, there were some concerns about how the project would affect their property, specifically their privacy. There were also worries about nuisances, such as skateboarding, graffiti, vandalism, noise, and trash. The Village Gardeners assured the community that their volunteers would quickly address any instances of vandalism or graffiti. Other concerns were lessened once the community saw the beauty, cleanliness, and inviting nature of the new Riverwalk.

In late 2013, before the completion of Riverwalk’s construction, the Village Gardeners initiated a final round of outreach to local residents associations and council district offices regarding the addition of a mixed-media art mural. The Village Gardeners hoped to transform an unattractive concrete spillway into a beautiful mural depicting history from the LA River. After a bid was put out to the public, local artist Kevin Carman was selected to do the work pro bono. Materials for the mural’s creation were paid for by donations from many groups, including former Councilmember LaBonge’s Office, Councilmember Krekorian’s Office, Los Angeles County Supervisor Zev Yaroslavsky’s Office, and the Sherman Oaks Neighborhood Council.

**Site Selection and Design**

North Valleyheart Riverwalk is approximately half a mile along the north bank of the LA River, parallel to North Valleyheart Drive, between Fulton and Coldwater Canyon Avenues. The site was previously a restricted LACFCD maintenance path with no legal public access, but was still widely used by neighbors for recreation, such as jogging and dog walking. Surrounding land use consists of single and multi-family residences along North and South Valleyheart Drive.

**INSERT Figure 4.2.2.6:** *Rendering of North Valleyheart Riverwalk*  
*Image Credit: Los Angeles Flood Control District*

The Riverwalk now features improved pedestrian access from Fulton, Ethel, and Coldwater Canyon Avenues; native landscaping; a multi-use trail; and hardscape improvements (e.g. retaining walls and in-wall seating). The Village Gardeners selected Ethel Avenue for pedestrian access to the River because it is approximately mid-way

between the Fulton and Coldwater Canyon Avenue bridges, which also offer River access.

The design for the “*Stairs to the Riverwalk*” and entrances on Fulton and Coldwater Canyon Avenues incorporated Americans with Disabilities Act compliant ramps. The ramps were not part of the original design and were expensive, but were required by the County and increased the River’s accessibility to those with disabilities. Building a pedestrian ramp on pylon structures from Coldwater Canyon Avenue was a significant challenge. Like many freeway on-ramps, specific guidelines restrict design and engineering options. While this and other issues delayed ramp construction, they did not delay the project timeline.

**INSERT Figure 4.2.2.7:** *View of the concrete ramp access to Riverwalk on Coldwater Canyon Avenue*  
*Image Credit: Jimmy Tran*

The project leads maximized the existing elements at the project site to create new and visually attractive access points. For example, LACFCD converted an existing sloped trail that led to the Riverwalk, midway between Ethel and Coldwater Canyon Avenues, into a wooden stairway which was safer and more aesthetically pleasing than the previous slope. Because the City of Los Angeles plans to install a bike path along the south bank of the River in the San Fernando Valley, bicycle facilities were not included in this project.

**INSERT Figure 4.2.2.8:** *Renovated slope with wooden steps along the Riverwalk*  
*Image Credit: Jimmy Tran*

Once the Riverwalk was constructed, the Village Gardeners organized and coordinated donations for the addition of a mixed-media mural in the concrete spillway. The mural consisted of about 40,000 handpicked local stones to form a mosaic of a Steelhead trout—a symbol of the LA River.<sup>4</sup> This was not officially part of LACFCD’s design but the agency’s openness and flexibility allowed it to become a highlight of the North Valleyheart Riverwalk.

**INSERT Figure 4.2.2.9:** *Steelhead Trout Mural by river artist, Kevin Carmen*  
*Image Credit: Jimmy Tran*

## Cost and Funding

The total cost of the North Valleyheart Riverwalk (not including the mural) was about \$3,582,000. This included \$2,230,000 for construction and \$1,352,000 for planning, permitting, consultants, site visits, materials testing, inspections, and other County services. The costliest components of the project were the pedestrian ramps at Ethel

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<sup>4</sup> Steelhead trout were one of many fish species that used to live in the Los Angeles River before it was converted into a concrete channel. See [http://www.kcet.org/updaily/socal\\_focus/commentary/come-winter-the-steelhead-should.html](http://www.kcet.org/updaily/socal_focus/commentary/come-winter-the-steelhead-should.html)

and Coldwater Canyon Avenues because they were difficult to engineer due to the site's geology, proximity to the flood channel, and limited space. While the Riverwalk was expensive relative to other half mile River greenway projects, it improves a significant lack of community access to the River and will link disconnected LA River greenways which are currently in construction in the San Fernando Valley.

LACFCD applied for but did not receive funding under Proposition 84, The Safe Drinking Water, Water Quality or Supply, Flood Control, River and Coastal Protection Bond Act of 2006. In the end, the project was financed by LACFCD whose annual budget is approved by the LA County Board of Supervisors. The Village Gardeners raised money from community members, council district offices, and resident associations to cover the cost of materials for the mural. The artist donated his time.

## **Permitting and Use Agreements**

LACFCD owns the right-of-way along the bank of the project site and, therefore, no additional permits or agreements were required. The Village Gardeners already had a permit from the agency to maintain the Riverwalk.

## **Operation and Maintenance**

There are three parties that are responsible for North Valleyheart Riverwalk operations and maintenance. An LACFCD landscape maintenance contractor maintains irrigation, plantings, and other large issues. LACFCD's Flood Maintenance Division oversees the contractor and handles large-scale problems, such as flooding. In addition, the Village Gardeners volunteers provide light pruning, litter removal, and daily maintenance.

LACFCD attributes successful maintenance of the site mainly to the Village Gardeners and their volunteers. The nonprofit relies on donations and the sale of advertising space along the Riverwalk to cover the cost of maintenance.

## Improving Access in South Gate

The landscape surrounding the concrete Los Angeles River channel near the City of South Gate and other Gateway Cities is characterized by industrialized complexes and utility corridors. In this area, along the River’s southern or lower portion, access to the River is available, but is often in poor condition and hard to find.

In 2005, the City of South Gate collaborated with the San Gabriel and Lower Los Angeles Rivers and Mountains Conservancy (Conservancy) to improve access on both banks of the River at Hollydale Park and at the end of Southern Avenue, an industrial corridor. The park is now an attractive place to stop along the River and Southern Avenue provides another route to South Gate Park, the City’s largest park. The project not only connected the bike path along the River to the City of South Gate, but also increased public awareness of two underutilized areas.

**INSERT Figure 4.2.3.2:** Location of LA River access points in South Gate  
*Image Credit: Marybeth Vegara, Rivers and Mountains Conservancy*

**INSERT Figure 4.2.3.1A:** LA River access point at Southern Avenue  
*Image Credit: Paul Adams, South Gate Park Director*

**INSERT Figure 4.2.3.1B:** LA River access point at Hollydale Park  
*Image Credit: Paul Adams, South Gate Park Director*

## Origins, Goals, and Timeline

One of the Conservancy’s goals is to enhance community access to the bike path along the River, particularly in the Gateway Cities region. By 2005, the group had improved or created multiple access points and connected River greenways in the San Gabriel Valley and lower LA River, but there were still neighborhoods without access. The Conservancy prioritized access in the underserved City of South Gate. Both the Conservancy and the City of South Gate share the vision of improved recreation along the River. Thus, they decided to work together. Southern Avenue and Hollydale Park lacked access to the River; equestrian users had even requested improvements for access at Hollydale Park years earlier. The Conservancy provided the necessary funding and outreach to develop the project, and the City led implementation.

<b>Project Progress</b>	<b>Date</b>
The Conservancy reaches out to Gateway Cities Council of Government to identify cities in need of access to the River and potential project sites.	May/June 2005
The Conservancy, City staff, and elected officials visit potential project sites.	Mid 2005
The Conservancy authorizes \$250,000 to South Gate for the	October 2005

project.	
South Gate posts a Notice for Project Bids.	April 2007
South Gate posts a Notice to Proceed with Construction.	June 2007
The Conservancy authorizes an additional grant of \$215,000 for restroom renovation.	October 2007
South Gate posts a Notice of Construction Completion.	January 2008
Grand opening and ribbon cutting ceremony at Hollydale Park.	January 2008

**Table XX:** *Implementation Timeline for improving access to the River in South Gate*

## Project Proponents

The City of South Gate, located in southeast Los Angeles County, partnered with the Conservancy to enhance access to the bike path along the River. The City's Department of Parks and Recreation managed the different phases of development and coordinated with other City departments to address project design and long-term maintenance.

The Conservancy's mission, accomplished primarily by providing funding for other entities to implement projects, is to preserve open space and wildlife habitat in order to provide for low-impact recreation and educational uses, wildlife habitat restoration and protection, and watershed improvements within eastern LA County and western Orange County. The Conservancy identified key areas for improved access along the bike path, facilitated the funding process, and aided the City with project development and design.

Unlike more community-driven River projects, the need for River access at Southern Avenue street end and Hollydale Park were determined and championed by the Conservancy and the City of South Gate. The two entities believed the project would greatly benefit the community. The conceptual plans were presented at a public meeting hosted by the Board of Directors of the Conservancy and the City's Parks and Recreation Commission.

## Site Selection and Design

In 2005, the Conservancy project managers, City staff, and elected officials visited potential project sites in the City of South Gate. The group identified Hollydale Park and two street ends (Southern Avenue and Tweedy Boulevard) as needing the most attention. While all three sites already provided access to the River and the bike path, they were difficult to find and needed renovations. If people knew that there was access to the River from Hollydale Park and/or Southern Avenue, they were greeted with an old, graffiti-covered rod iron gate that was not consistently open nor in good condition. While the park did have some recreational facilities such as a baseball field, picnic areas, playgrounds, and an equestrian center, it was in need of rehabilitation.

**INSERT Figure 4.2.3.3A:** *Northwestern entrance to Hollydale Park from the LA River bike path leading to the equestrian arena.*  
*Image Credit: Henry McCann*

**INSERT Figure 4.2.3.3B:** Southwestern entrance to Hollydale Park leading to recreational facilities.

Image Credit: Henry McCann

Ultimately, project proponents prioritized the Park and Southern Avenue for development, including attractive River gates that would draw attention from people in the area. It was especially difficult to draw attention to Southern Avenue because it is an industrial corridor with little foot traffic.

**INSERT Figure 4.2.3.4A:** Decorative gates with butterfly designs at Southern Avenue  
Image Credit: Paul Adams, South Gate Park Director

**INSERT Figure 4.2.3.4B:** Decorative gates with butterfly designs at Hollydale Park  
Image Credit: Paul Adams, South Gate Park Director

The original concepts for Hollydale Park and Southern Avenue included decorative gates, interpretative signage, native landscaping, bicycle racks, and water fountains. The concepts for the park also included restroom renovations, a shaded picnic area, and equestrian improvements. However, numerous budget and land acquisition challenges limited the final improvements that could be made. The Los Angeles County Flood Control District (LACFCD) has strict standards on what can be built near the bike path and concluded that the site was not wide enough to add native landscaping, signage, or water fountains. The plan for the native landscaping and related interpretative signage at Southern Avenue also had to be removed from the project scope.

Southern Avenue
<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Butterfly and leaf-themed gate</li><li>• A bike rack</li></ul>
Hollydale Park
<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Butterfly and leaf-themed gate</li><li>• LA River/Conservancy signage</li><li>• Renovated restrooms</li><li>• Improved pedestrian and equestrian ramps leading to the restrooms from the equestrian paths</li><li>• Native landscaping with shaded structure and picnic tables</li><li>• A drinking fountain</li></ul>

**Table XX:** Final design features to improve access to the River in South Gate

## Cost and Funding

In October 2005, upon their staff's recommendation, the Conservancy's Board of Directors authorized a grant of \$250,000 to the City of South Gate for the improvements at Southern Avenue and Hollydale Park. The money came from Proposition 40 (California Clean Water, Clean Air, Safe Neighborhood Parks and Coastal Protection

Act of 2002) and Proposition 50 (California Water Security, Clean Drinking Water, Coastal and Beach Protection Act of 2002). The project budget included construction documents, project management, access point amenities, grading, irrigation, and the removal of existing structures. Renovating restroom facilities at Hollydale Park was not included in the budget due to its costliness. However, the restroom renovations were kept in the project design so the City could identify additional funds for its construction.

By June 2007, the City was not able to obtain funding for the restrooms and requested their \$250,000 Conservancy grant be increased by \$215,000 for the renovations. With the current Hollydale restrooms out of service and in bad condition, the closest bathroom along the bike path was 2.4 miles north at Cudahy Park. The Conservancy Board approved the request and allocated the additional money under Proposition 50. The total cost of the access improvements in South Gate was \$465,000.

**INSERT Figure 4.2.3.5:** *Distance between restrooms along the LA River in South Gate*  
Image Credit: Marybeth Vegara, Rivers and Mountains Conservancy

**INSERT Figure 4.2.3.6:** *Renovated restroom facilities*  
Image Credit: Paul Adams, South Gate Park Director

## **Permitting and Use Agreements**

No permits or use agreements were required because Southern Avenue and Hollydale Park are both City of South Gate properties. The original project proposal for the Southern Avenue street end would have required a land acquisition but project proponents decided not to move forward with the amenities proposed on that piece of land due to time and funding constraints.

## **Operation and Maintenance**

The City's Department of Parks and Recreation and Department of Public Works maintain Hollydale Park and Southern Avenue, respectively. While grounds workers already inspected and responded to daily issues in the park, increased visibility of access to the River, bike path, and amenities, increased use and the need for maintenance. For example, instances of vandalism and graffiti are now more likely to occur and to be reported due to increased foot traffic and public attention to the area. Maintenance of the Southern Avenue access remains challenging because Public Works inspects the area less frequently: maintenance depends on requests from local businesses which are infrequent. While residents tend to be vocal about maintenance concerns, businesses often do not realize they have a role to play in reporting issues. To help address the minimal residential visibility of the River at Southern Avenue, the two City departments hosted informal conversations with nearby businesses to encourage them to notify the City of any illicit activities.

# Connecting Street Ends to the Elysian Valley Bikeway

There is a sentiment of pride in the Elysian Valley along the Los Angeles River. Local communities, organizations, and government agencies have revitalized much of the greenway with welcoming pocket parks, decorative gates, pedestrian bridges, and native landscaping. However, numerous streets still dead end at the River without providing community access to it.

To address this issue, in 2008, the Mountains Recreation Conservation Authority (MRCA) partnered with the City of Los Angeles to develop and implement the Elysian Valley Bikeway Project to provide safe access to the River and bike path as well as plant native vegetation and improve water quality at three sites. Gatewood, Fernleaf, and Dallas Streets which previously dead-ended at the River now provide access to it and the 2.5-mile bike path along the west bank, starting at Fletcher Drive and Interstate 110 and terminating at Egret Park by Interstate 5.

**INSERT Figure 4.2.4.1:** *Proposed site locations for street end improvements*  
*Image Credit: Brian Baldauf, MRCA Project Manager*

## Origins, Goals, and Timeline

In 2008, with the planned completion of the City of Los Angeles Department of Transportation’s 2.5-mile LA River bike path (also known as the Elysian Valley Bikeway) within two years, the City wanted to complement this new greenway by creating additional places with native landscaping and water treatment improvements to safely access the River. They partnered with MRCA, which had the resources and experience to create development plans aligned with the City’s *2007 Los Angeles River Revitalization Master Plan* (LARRMP) and Los Angeles County’s 1996 LA River Master Plan.

<b>Timeline</b>	<b>Date</b>
Project discussions and conception	2008
MRCA outreach to Elysian Valley neighborhood	2008-2011
Apply for grant funding	2009-2010
Develop Memorandum of Understanding	2011-2012
MRCA works with City to develop green streets standard compliance	2012-2014
Obtain Bureau of Engineering B-Permit for landscape improvement, storm drain changes, street widening, and grade changes	2012-2014
Project construction	2013-2014

**Table XX:** *Implementation timeline to develop the Elysian Valley Bikeway Project*

## Project Proponents and Community Collaborators

Since the establishment of the LARRMP in 2007, the City of Los Angeles has led numerous efforts to revitalize its 32-mile stretch of the River. The City has worked with local agencies, organizations, and regional conservancies to address gaps in public access along the River, to identify local community needs for park space and recreation, to improve and restore natural habitats and water quality, and to foster local pride for the River.

MRCA is a local, public agency created to preserve and manage open space, parks, watersheds, and wildlife habitat in LA County. They have developed multiple innovative River access points at street ends in the Elysian Valley and helped transform how people think and interact with the River. MRCA had already been working along the River in Elysian Valley for more than 20 years implementing many neighborhood park projects before there was any attention on providing green spaces along the River. Their park projects, starting with Elysian Valley Gateway Park, have been instrumental in bringing the community to the River and sparking a desire to provide more open space, connectivity, habitat restoration, and water conservation projects along the River.

In 2011, the City of LA and MRCA drafted a Memorandum of Understanding, which laid the framework for the Elysian Valley Bikeway Project's management, development, design, and maintenance. MRCA developed the project, including securing funding, design, permitting, and construction, and the City's Department of Recreation and Parks, Board of Public Works, Bureau of Engineering, and Bureau of Sanitation, supported MRCA with project permit reviews and maintenance.

MRCA prioritizes community involvement and stakeholder support in all phases of River project development. By the start of construction, MRCA had met with stakeholder groups in different parts of the Elysian Valley neighborhood. They communicated with elected officials and residents through community meetings providing a forum for public feedback on the project. Former Councilmember Eric Garcetti was a key stakeholder in Council District 13 providing staff support and encouraging community buy-in for the project.

## **Site Selection and Design**

The selection of the three street ends that received improvements resulted from an examination of factors including: the community's need to access the River, the potential for water quality treatment improvements, and the ease and cost of project implementation. Ease of project implementation was determined by the amount of open space, street width, number of trees, and current parking demand. In particular, MRCA prioritized sites where they could cost effectively maximize the benefits of water quality treatment improvements. One challenge to increasing access to the River in this area was a 10 to 15-foot elevation difference from some street ends to the bike path.

MRCA wanted to create as many access points as possible within their budget and carefully chose locations lacking access to the River. Fernleaf, Gatewood, and Dallas street ends had no public access. All three had River-adjacent parcels of vacant land

where people would dump trash. Gatewood and Fernleaf Streets are surrounded by single-family and multi-family housing, but all improvements were on City property. Dallas street end, located about a half mile north of the other sites, is a commercial district. This development took place on public property and private land owned by the Bivans Corporation, a packaging machine manufacturer.

The design goals of developing access points at Gatewood, Fernleaf, and Dallas Streets emphasized both pleasant aesthetics and functionality. Staying true to their mission, MRCA wanted to improve the amount and quality of storm water that infiltrated the ground at the sites. To do this, they applied three best management practice (BMPs) technologies, two of which were pulled from the Green Street Standards developed by the City Department of Public Works and Bureau of Engineering. The original plans included the following designs: at Gatewood Street, permeable pavers that allow water to infiltrate the ground; at Fernleaf Street (Figure 4.2.4.2A, B, C), a filter trench that slows and cleans water entering the River; and at Dallas Street, a vegetative swale curb (i.e. a channel or ditch with plants) that traps debris and pollution from reaching the River. Additional amenities included small stretches of native landscaping along the bike path, a seating area near Altman Street, stairway and ramp access to the bike path at each street end, and improvements to an existing River gate at Fernleaf Street (Figures 4.2.4.1 above, 4.2.4.2A, B, C).

**INSERT Figure 4.2.4.2A:** *Concept rendering to improve access to the LA River at Dallas Street end*

Image Credit: *Brian Baldauf, MRCA Project Manager*

**INSERT Figure 4.2.4.2B:** *Concept rendering to improve access to the LA River at Gatewood Street end*

Image Credit: *Brian Baldauf, MRCA Project Manager*

**INSERT Figure 4.2.4.2C:** *Concept rendering to improve access to the LA River at Fernleaf Street end*

Image Credit: *Brian Baldauf, MRCA Project Manager*

The final design included all of the aspects listed above, except for the development of an infiltration trench and permeable pavement on Fernleaf Street. The trench was cost-prohibitive due to its maintenance requirements. MRCA and the Bureau of Sanitation tried to include permeable pavement instead, but this also was not feasible due to the location of utility infrastructure that would require costly relocation. In addition, to address public safety concerns, they added a gate to this location which could be closed during storm events to the final design.

Best Management Practice	Function	Description
Interlocking permeable pavers	Allows water to percolate into the ground through crevices between paving	Can be built with a range of sustainable materials and a variety of shapes and styles

	blocks	
Infiltration trench	Allows runoff from impervious surfaces to be captured and infiltrated into the ground	Trenches or ditches are excavated and covered with materials such as landscaping and porous material, like sand and stones
Vegetated swale with curb cuts	Traps trash and debris; promotes water infiltration and reduces storm water flow	Natural and manmade broad channel with vegetation
<b>Source:</b> Based on Board of Public Works, City of LA. (2011). Development Best Management Handbook 4 <sup>th</sup> edition		

**Table XX:** *Benefits of storm water BMPs considered at project sites*

## **Cost and Funding**

The total cost for the project was approximately \$550,000; roughly \$120,000-\$150,000 per site. MRCA applied for and received grant funding under Proposition 12, the Safe Neighborhoods Parks, Clean Water, Clean Air, and Coastal Protection Bond Act. They supplemented outstanding administrative costs in house. Keeping the proposed project designs and construction within budget was challenging. For example, they encountered the unexpected costs of testing environmentally friendly construction materials in order to meet the City Bureau of Engineering’s new Green Street Standards. MRCA was forced to cut back on some initially proposed storm water BMPs to stay within the budget and timeline of the project.

## **Permitting and Use Agreements**

MRCA was responsible for obtaining all necessary engineering, design, and construction permits for each street end project. They demonstrated new ideas, developed new standards, and participated in common River project approval procedures.

Securing permission to use water quality BMPs was a challenge. For example, new environmentally friendly materials (e.g. permeable pavers) required extensive testing before the City’s Department of Building and Safety would approve them. Due to MRCA’s efforts, future projects using the same materials, will not need to demonstrate their effectiveness. Additionally, the Fernleaf Street end improvement was designed and permitted twice before project proponents decided not to include an infiltration trench at the site. This impacted project costs and delayed the timeline.

In order to secure Bureau of Engineering permits for each site, MRCA had to comply with the agency’s new 2011 Green Street Standards which dictated how to install BMPs for water quality improvement projects. While these standards were developed to streamline development, MRCA could not use them without minor changes because of the existing unique conditions of each site. The agency needed an “exemption” to alter and use the standards and then worked closely with City staff to develop new

standards, engineered and tested by the Bureau, appropriate for their sites. By changing the standard, MRCA had to demonstrate the effectiveness of their designs to construction inspectors who had never seen projects of this type.

MRCA also participated in common River project approval procedures, like the Bureau of Engineering's B-permit process. This procedure took nearly two years due to aforementioned design changes and the need to implement Green Street Standards. It was required for landscape improvement, storm drain changes, street widening, and grade changes. MRCA, with the help of the City, also secured a "right of entry" on Bivans Corporation's private property.

## **Operation and Maintenance**

For the first 20 years of operation, the City of LA is responsible for maintenance of the Elysian Valley Bikeway project, as detailed in the Memorandum of Understanding between the City and MRCA. It states that all River greenway related activities, like landscaping and irrigation, are to be managed by the City's Department of Recreation and Parks. Storm water management, such as the BMPs, is to be maintained by the City's Bureau of Sanitation. Daily maintenance, such as litter graffiti, and trash removal, is to be maintained by the City's Board of Public Works, Office of Community Beautification.

**INSERT Figure 4.2.4.3:** *Before and after images of Dallas Street end*  
Image Credit: Brian Baldauf, MRCA Project Manager

**INSERT Figure 4.2.4.4:** *Before and after images of Gatewood Street end*  
Image Credit: Brian Baldauf, MRCA Project Manager

**INSERT Figure 4.2.4.5:** *Before and after images of Fernleaf Street end*  
Image Credit: Brian Baldauf, MRCA Project Manager

## 2.3. Guidance: Lessons Learned and Best Practices

This section presents important considerations for those interested in increasing community access to the Los Angeles River. We do so by summarizing lessons learned and best practices from case studies presented earlier in this chapter. While these projects created or improved access to the River, in most cases, the access point was only one component of a larger effort to develop a continuous River greenway. Therefore, guidance offered here may apply to larger River projects and advocates should consider how increasing access to the River can complement other greenway improvement efforts.

Challenges shared among this chapter’s case studies include unexpected costs, project delays, collaborating with multiple agencies to obtain permits, as well as identifying and prioritizing gaps in community access to the River. To address these issues, project proponents should develop flexible timelines that allow sufficient time for community and stakeholder engagement, understanding project site conditions, identifying and applying for funding, and permitting.

	<b>Creating Access through Duck Park</b>	<b>Creating Access along North Valleyheart Riverwalk</b>	<b>Improving Access in South Gate</b>	<b>Connecting Street Ends to the Elysian Valley Bikeway</b>
<b>Summary</b>	One of the first pocket parks and street end projects along the River; a small-scale but impactful cost effective project; provides new access to the River, a scenic resting stop, and access to nature	Community group/LA County partnership transformed a half-mile restricted access maintenance path into a publicly accessible recreational trail and access point to the River; new access includes Americans with Disabilities Act compliant ramps, improved native landscaping and recreational/educational opportunities, and public art	Improved access for pedestrians, bicyclists and equestrians to the LA River; access to the River and bike path was enhanced at Hollydale Park and at Southern Avenue; includes renovated restrooms	Improved community access to the River and bike path at Gatewood, Fernleaf, and Dallas Streets using new City of LA Bureau of Engineering’s Green Street Standards; applied storm water best management practices
<b>Project Proponent</b>	North East Trees (nonprofit)	LA County Flood Control District (local government)	City of South Gate (local government)	Mountains and Recreation Conservation Authority (local government)

<b>Partner</b>	Mountains Recreation and Conservation Authority (local government)	Village Gardeners of the LA River (nonprofit)	San Gabriel and Lower LA Rivers and Mountains Conservancy (local government)	City of LA (local government)
<b>Location</b>	City of LA, Elysian Valley neighborhood; at Meadowvale Street end	City of LA, Studio City and Sherman Oaks neighborhoods; between Fulton and Coldwater Canyon Avenues	City of South Gate, Southern Avenue street end and Hollydale Park	City of LA, Elysian Valley neighborhood; end of Gatewood, Fernleaf, and Dallas Streets
<b>Users</b>	Pedestrians, cyclists, local community	Pedestrians, local and surrounding communities	Pedestrians, cyclists, equestrians, local and surrounding communities	Pedestrians, cyclists, local community
<b>Improvements</b>	Installed new decorative River gate; planted native vegetation; added a shaded bench and decorative steps	Constructed recreational trail with native landscaping and River signage; restored habitat; improved water quality	Installed new decorative River gate; bike rack; River signage; and drinking fountain; planted native vegetation; renovated restrooms	Connected three dead end streets to the River and bike path; provides access for disabled persons; applied storm water best management practices; planted native vegetation; added seating area
<b>Cost</b>	\$263,000 (cost for larger project, including Duck Park)	\$3,582,000	\$465,000	~\$550,000
<b>Completed</b>	2004	2014	2008	2014

Table XX: Summary of the four case studies and their key defining characteristics

## Summary of Challenges and Strategies to Overcome Them

Table XX: Developing Access to and from the LA River		
Development Process	Challenges	Solutions
Community engagement	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Not every neighborhood is outspoken about River access needs</li> <li>Property owners adjacent to proposed project sites often have concerns about</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Be proactive in identifying areas that lack River access and advocate for increasing access</li> <li>Hold public meetings, attend community gatherings, and actively seek community</li> </ul>

	<p>development</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Adequately addressing community concerns throughout project timeline</li> </ul>	<p>feedback (in some cases, door to door visits are appropriate)</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Incorporate community feedback into project design and implementation</li> </ul>
Design	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Balancing form and function of access points; including complying with the American with Disabilities Act</li> <li>• Project sites may have unique geology, topography, etc.</li> <li>• Materials used impact maintenance and costs</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Engage with community members to seek feedback on aesthetic preferences</li> <li>• Collaborate with permitting agencies to understand requirements early in the process</li> <li>• Investigate and incorporate American with Disabilities Act compliance guidelines early in project design</li> <li>• Prepare for possible delays by scheduling extra time for each step and setting aside extra funds</li> <li>• Aim to use materials that reduce the need for maintenance (like anti-graffiti paint)</li> </ul>
Physical siting	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Prioritizing multiple sites</li> <li>• Project feasibility considering local and regional needs, existing uses, and potential impacts</li> <li>• Project sites may have unique geology, topography, etc.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Communicate with the community and public entities to prioritize sites</li> <li>• Consider existing access points and other greenway features when planning site location</li> <li>• Examine site conditions early in the design phase</li> </ul>
Cost	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Unforeseen site conditions and permitting can increase costs</li> <li>• Identifying the exact cost of the access point alone because they are usually components of larger projects</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Plan and budget for potential unknown costs</li> </ul>
Funding	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Securing funding</li> <li>• Funders often have strict guidelines</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Identify all project benefits; projects that address multiple community needs have a higher probability of receiving funding than single component projects</li> <li>• Seek sites and plan to develop amenities that enable more user and environmental benefits</li> <li>• Carefully read funding requirements</li> </ul>

Permitting and Use Agreements	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Obtaining permits may require a significant amount of time</li> <li>• Proposing and developing precedent setting standards needed to implement project</li> <li>• Projects on or near private lands may require a “right of entry” agreement with landowners</li> <li>• Unforeseen site conditions may require re-permitting</li> <li>• Unclear agency jurisdictions; permitting can be difficult</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Meet with permitting agencies early in the process and ask questions</li> <li>• Develop a feasible timeline considering all potential permit requirements</li> <li>• Partner with county or city departments to understand and reduce the burden of the permitting process</li> <li>• Consider project sites owned by the city or county: it may require fewer or no permits</li> <li>• Meet with project-adjacent private landowners early in the process</li> <li>• Expect delays and complications</li> </ul>
Operations and Maintenance	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Operating and maintaining sites without dedicated funding</li> <li>• Ensuring proper landscaping maintenance</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Consider operation and maintenance early in process; find a dedicated entity to take on this role</li> <li>• Identify project maintenance components that may require special skills and address accordingly</li> </ul>
Implementation schedule	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Inconsistent grant deadlines and development timeline</li> <li>• Delays caused by re-permitting and design changes</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Develop a flexible timeline and reassess it often</li> <li>• Communicate regularly with funders</li> <li>• Seek guidance on permitting early in the process</li> </ul>

Table XX Potential challenges and solutions for each step of the development process.

## How do I lay the foundation to create or improve community access to the LA River?

Creating or improving community access to the River requires careful thought during every step of the development process. The foundation for this type of project begins with feasible project goals, strong leadership and collaboration, and a strategy for community engagement.

### *Goals and Motivation*

Clear project goals agreed on by project proponents can help to structure collaboration and community engagement. The case studies in this chapter demonstrate goals aligned with a regional plan (i.e. *Los Angeles River Master Plan*, *Los Angeles River Revitalization Master Plan*, etc.) and the lead proponent’s mission. For instance, creating safe access to and from the River bike path was a primary goal of North East

Trees and the Mountains and Recreation Conservation Authority when they developed Duck Park and street ends in the Elysian Valley, respectively.

The motivation for increasing access to the LA River must begin by identifying the community's needs and by examining existing River conditions. The project proponents for the North Valleyheart Riverwalk and South Gate projects were focused on their communities' need for increased physical activity and public space. Project proponents should also consider the historical and cultural context of the surrounding community. Public agencies often define the need for access through site observations and by identifying gaps in transportation networks, such as adjacent street ends that do not have access to the River. Community forums and efforts to solicit community feedback can result in identifying community needs. For example, before the City of South Gate improved Hollydale Park, their Parks and Recreation Department learned from equestrian users that they were unable to ride their horses in that area. Responding to these users helped to frame the motivation and goals for the project. Improving existing access points may be motivated by other issues that impact accessibility such as safety, differences in street grade, lack of accommodations for those with limited mobility, poor signage, or maintenance issues.

### *Leadership and Collaboration*

Effective LA River project development and collaboration requires strong leadership. Lead organizations should understand the physical and cultural needs of the community when access point projects are proposed. An important goal for lead organizations is to develop professional relationships with agencies, community leaders, and other stakeholders who can serve as resources during project implementation. For the implementation of Duck Park and the Elysian Valley Bikeway project, getting support from Councilmember Garcetti was critical to success. Backing from elected officials is especially helpful because they can inspire community support and can motivate streamlined agency approvals.

In all case studies featured, the lead organization partnered with agencies with relevant expertise. For example, the City of Los Angeles and the Mountains and Recreation Conservation Authority developed a Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) for the Elysian Valley Bikeway project based on each entity's expertise. MOUs can be a great tool to clearly lay out a framework for management, development, design, and maintenance.

### *Community Engagement*

In most instances, community engagement and empowerment is important for developing River access points. The community can either drive the project, such as the North Valleyheart Riverwalk project, or lead proponents can facilitate public education on the project and then incorporate community feedback. However, some communities may not be aware that they could have access to the River and a local agency or nonprofit may have more insight into opportunities. For example, in South Gate, the City

worked with the San Gabriel and Lower Los Angeles River Mountains and Rivers Conservancy to identify communities lacking River access and then identified potential sites. The community engagement process should be flexible and based on a community's needs and interests.

Once the need for increased access to the River is identified, the next step is to engage elected officials and city departments with jurisdiction in the proposed project area. The vision of a continuous River greenway with equal opportunity for access by all is powerful and motivational. It can increase the likelihood of support from other community leaders, like councilmembers and supervisors, as well as key representatives in city and county departments. Broad support for projects allows for increased opportunities to obtain regional, state, and federal funding.

**INSERT Figure 4.3.1:** *North East Trees founder Scott Wilson with former Councilmember Garcetti at Duck Park's dedication and opening in August 2004*  
Image Credit: North East Trees

Engaging communities from project start to finish is key because community perceptions may change throughout the process. While project proponents did not receive much feedback when they proposed the North Valleyheart Riverwalk, they did later in the development process. Just before construction, neighbors were concerned about how their property and privacy would be impacted. After construction, they were concerned about nuisances like skateboarding, graffiti, vandalism, noise, and trash. The primary challenge for project leads is soliciting adequate feedback and addressing concerns at each stage of development.

## **What are important design considerations?**

### *Site Selection*

Every community along the River has different access needs: providing links or public entry to the River is often based on proximity and connection to neighborhood street ends, parks, commercial districts, and River crossings. Because funding and resources are limited, lead organizations must prioritize how many and which areas have the greatest need.

Another important consideration for site selection is thinking about how increasing access to the River can complement existing or proposed projects in the area. For example, the River greenway is not completely connected in the San Fernando Valley. Projects like North Valleyheart Riverwalk help fill in these gaps and complement other projects. The Elysian Valley Bikeway project was conceptualized to complement the Los Angeles Department of Transportation's planned development of a Class I bike path in the area.

**INSERT Figure 4.3.2:** *Cyclists and Pedestrians along the Elysian Valley Bike Path*  
*Image Credit: Andrew Pasillas*

Surrounding land uses are also important (e.g., residential, schools, commercial) to consider and can affect prioritizing site development. For example, in the City of South Gate, improving access to the River from Southern Avenue—an industrial corridor—increased the visibility of the River allowing for increased user traffic and safety.

In most cases, a matrix can be created to score potential project sites. In the past two decades, North East Trees and the Mountains and Recreation Conservation Authority have increased River access at numerous street ends using this approach. Each project required an extensive evaluation of street and River conditions and was selected by criterion that accounted for land use, traffic, trees, utility infrastructure, and land ownership. Other factors to consider include cost, ease of implementation, and the potential for water quality treatment improvements.

### *Design Concepts*

River access project design should be creative; flexible; sensitive to the history and culture of a community; as well as comply with engineering, permitting, and building requirements including the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA). The *Los Angeles River Master Plan* provides general guidelines for designing River gates, fences, signage, and landscaping.

**INSERT Figure 4.3.3A:** *Guidelines for custom gates such as the ones built by River artist Michael Amescua follow the LARMP guidelines for gate height, width, and construction material*  
*Image Credit: Los Angeles Times*

**INSERT Figure 4.3.3B:** *For example, guidelines for custom gates such as the ones built by LA River artist Michael Amescua follow the LARMP guidelines for gate height, width, and construction material*  
*Image Credit: Los Angeles River Master Plan Landscaping Guidelines and Plant Palettes*

There are no specific standards for constructing arches, public art pieces, or pocket parks. Project proponents should discuss all designs with agencies early in the process. Failure to do so can complicate, delay, and/or increase the cost of projects. For instance, project proponents for North Valleyheart Riverwalk and the Elysian Valley Bikeway project did not expect to have to comply with ADA and the City of Los Angeles Bureau of Engineering's new Green Streets Standards, respectively. For both projects, compliance was an initial barrier to project implementation. The Village Gardeners and the Mountains and Recreation Conservation Authority worked closely with agency

partners in order to complete their respective projects. Be prepared to make design changes at any step in the development process.

Contracting community artists for River projects is a popular design option which encourages local participation and enhances River and community identity. Following the construction of North Valleyheart Riverwalk, the Village Gardeners solicited an artist to design a mixed-media mural to transform a concrete spillway near Ethel Avenue into a scene from the River's history. This project was funded by donations from councilmembers, county supervisors, neighborhood councils, and other organizations. Other examples of local artist contributions include the River gates at Glendale Narrows Riverwalk (featured in Chapter 5: Bridges) and Valleyheart Greenway (featured in Chapter 4: Pathways) which used local 5<sup>th</sup> graders' designs.

**INSERT Figure 4.3.4A:** *From left to right: Great Heron Gate by Brett Goldstone and frog themed gate at Valleyheart Greenway and Path*  
Image Credit: Andrew Pasillas

**INSERT Figure 4.3.4B:** *From left to right: Great Heron Gate by Brett Goldstone and frog themed gate at Valleyheart Greenway and Path*  
Image Credit: Andrew Pasillas

#### *Amenities and Materials*

In addition to providing community access to the LA River, project leads should consider incorporating environmentally sustainable amenities like storm water management features (e.g. bioswales and infiltration trenches), native landscaping, and recycled materials for hardscaping (i.e. benches, walls, bike racks). While these may add to project costs, they can significantly benefit users and help meet project goals. For example, in addition to providing a place for recreation, interpretive signs at North Valleyheart Riverwalk educates users by detailing the River's history. Seating on both sides of the River is provided at Duck Park. The South Gate access project not only meets the needs of equestrians, but also provides renovated restrooms to benefit all greenway users.

**INSERT Figure 4.3.5A** *Bioswale at the Dallas Street end in the Elysian Valley*  
Image Credit A: Andrew Pasillas

**INSERT Figure 4.3.5B** *Interpretive Signs along the North Valleyheart Riverwalk in Studio City*  
Image Credit B: Jimmy Tran

**INSERT Figure 4.3.5C** *Recycled material used for a bench at Duck Park*  
Image Credit C: Jimmy Tran

The use of various materials can dictate cost, maintenance, and the environmental sustainability of projects. Lead organizations should use construction materials that provide environmental benefits to the River, maintain aesthetic quality, and reduce maintenance requirements (e.g., native landscaping, anti-graffiti coating, durable metals). More sustainable materials, like permeable pavement which allows storm water to seep into the ground, may require testing for agency approval. This caused delays for the Elysian Valley Bikeway project.

## **What are important cost and funding considerations?**

### *Costs*

Estimating the cost of future projects that aim to increase community access to the River is difficult because these efforts are often one component of a larger greenway project with pocket parks, landscaping, bridges, signage, etc. In the selected case studies, project costs ranged from approximately \$250,000 to \$3,600,000. Street end improvements in the Elysian Valley cost roughly \$120,000 to \$150,000 per site. Project proponents should be conservative and flexible when budgeting: costs are subject to change through the development process, especially after permitting and during construction. For example, as mentioned above, the Village Gardeners did not expect to spend money to provide disability access to North Valleyheart Riverwalk. Without financial support from Los Angeles County, they would not have been able to continue with the project.

The total cost of North Valleyheart Riverwalk (not including the mural) was about \$3,582,000, including \$2,230,000 for construction and \$1,352,000 for planning, permitting, consultants, site visits, materials testing, inspections, and other County services. The costliest component was engineering ADA-compliant pedestrian ramps. From the perspective of cost per mile of River bank revitalized, the half-mile project was expensive. However, it included multiple features and amenities. It not only improved access for pedestrians and disabled persons from three streets, but also restored native habitat, provided seating, developed a multi-use trail, and created public art (Steelhead trout mural). The Village Gardeners will also maintain the site at their own cost.

In summary, project costs will fluctuate depending on the number of amenities provided and how the proposed access point will alter the site's existing conditions. Project proponents should prioritize what amenities are most important without undermining their goals.

### *Funding*

Like many River projects, securing funding for community access points requires time, partnerships, and creativity. It is important to allow adequate time to apply for and receive grants. Consideration should be given to applying for money from local and state conservation agencies; cities and counties; and LA County Regional Park and Open Space District. Funding may also be available under Propositions A, 12, 40, and

50; from private donations; as matching grants and through in kind donations. Funding agencies typically prioritize projects that emphasize creating equitable access to parks, open spaces, and pathways. Closing the funding gap may require unconventional ideas. For example, the Village Gardeners sell advertising space along North Valleyheart Riverwalk to cover some maintenance costs.

While increasing community access to the River can be an affordable, small standalone project, we recommend that project leads consider how increasing access fits into larger, already funded city and regional planning efforts. Additionally, if funding is limited, project amenities should be prioritized. For instance, the City of South Gate decided not to initially ask the San Gabriel and Lower Los Angeles Rivers and Mountains Conservancy for money to fund bathroom renovations because it was too expensive. However, later in the project because the two entities had maintained a good relationship, the City requested an additional \$215,000 for the amenity. The Village Gardeners also prioritized project components when they decided to only revitalize the north bank of the River, due to funding limitations and because it was a manageable project for an organization of their size.

Recurring challenges to implementing River projects are time and stakeholder expectations. Funders may require a strict spending timeline or progress reports that do not align with the actual timeline for project development. Managing funder's expectations through clear and consistent communication is key. This includes if there are "normal" project delays or proposed amenities are not completed in time. While poor communication with funders may not necessarily jeopardize a project, it may affect future funding opportunities.

## **What are important planning and permitting considerations?**

Like most River projects, efforts to increase community access to the River may require land acquisition, construction approvals, as well as special city, county, state, and federal permits. City or County-led efforts to improve community access to the River on their own property may be the easiest projects to implement. For example, the project in South Gate did not require any permits or use agreements because Southern Avenue and Hollydale Park are both City properties. Similarly, the Los Angeles Flood Control District owns the right-of-way along North Valleyheart Riverwalk. Permits and agreements required in the selected case studies include: B-permit for landscape improvements, storm drain changes, street widening, and grade changes within the City of Los Angeles (Bureau of Engineering); compliance with Green Street Standards (Bureau of Engineering); construction permits for projects on County right-of-ways (Los Angeles County Flood Control District); and the 408 permit (U.S. Army Corps of Engineers).

All projects in the City of Los Angeles that use best management practices for storm water infiltration and water quality improvements on public streets must comply with the Bureau of Engineering's Green Street Standards. If projects cannot comply, the lead organization may need to work with City staff to amend the standards and then

demonstrate the new standard’s effectiveness. The Mountains and Recreation Conservation Authority took this approach to improve access in South Gate.

Although not mentioned in the case studies in this chapter, many of the easements within the River corridor restrict certain parcels to narrowly defined uses. These uses are administered by mutual agreement between easement holders and potential users. Most importantly, flood control easements (also called “drainage easements”) administered by the Los Angeles County Department of Public Works (LADPW) cover the entire River corridor and up to 25 feet beyond the top-of-bank. Any proposed development within this easement, regardless of underlying ownership, must accommodate the primary purpose of flood control and considered by the Los Angeles County Board of Supervisors.

Projects on or near private lands may require a “right of entry” agreement with landowners, like the one signed by the Mountains and Recreation Conservation Authority and Bivans Corporation for the Elysian Valley Bikeway project.

In most cases, upfront research and accounting for all types of permitting will help project leads develop a feasible timeline, especially, if the project is one component of a larger River development project.

## **What are important project maintenance considerations?**

For successful, sustainable access projects, proponents should identify operations and maintenance needs during the design process. The construction materials that are selected can be a good predictor of maintenance requirements. All case studies featured in this chapter used anti-graffiti coating or durable materials to help withstand long-term weathering. The use of a native and a drought tolerant plant palette, provided in the *Los Angeles River Master Plan*, helps to reduce the need for and cost of irrigation and landscaping. A challenge, however, is to ensure that native plants are properly irrigated, pruned, and mulched so they can establish.

**INSERT Figure 4.3.6:** *Native plants along the recreational trail at the North Valleyheart Riverwalk*

*Image Credit: Jimmy Tran*

Developing an agreement early in the process, which designates an organization for project operations and maintenance is critical. Consider selecting city departments or organizations that are already responsible for maintaining similar or adjacent sites. For example, the City of LA and the Mountains and Recreation Conservation Authority drafted a Memorandum of Understanding, designating the first 20 years of maintaining the improved street ends in the Elysian Valley to the City’s Bureau of Sanitation, Department of Recreation and Parks, and Office of Community Beautification—according to their expertise. This approach was also used for the City of South Gate’s project.

**INSERT Figure 4.3.7A and 4.3.7B:** *Coordination among project proponents is needed ensure that graffiti and litter does not impede access*

*Image Credit: Henry McCann*

Operations and maintenance agreements should establish how often a site should be maintained, the cost of maintaining project features (e.g., storm drain filters, landscaping, repainting, graffiti removal), and resources available for River users to report maintenance issues.

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- Steve Costley, Deputy Director

### San Gabriel and Lower Los Angeles Rivers and Mountains Conservancy

- Marybeth Vegara, Project Manager

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