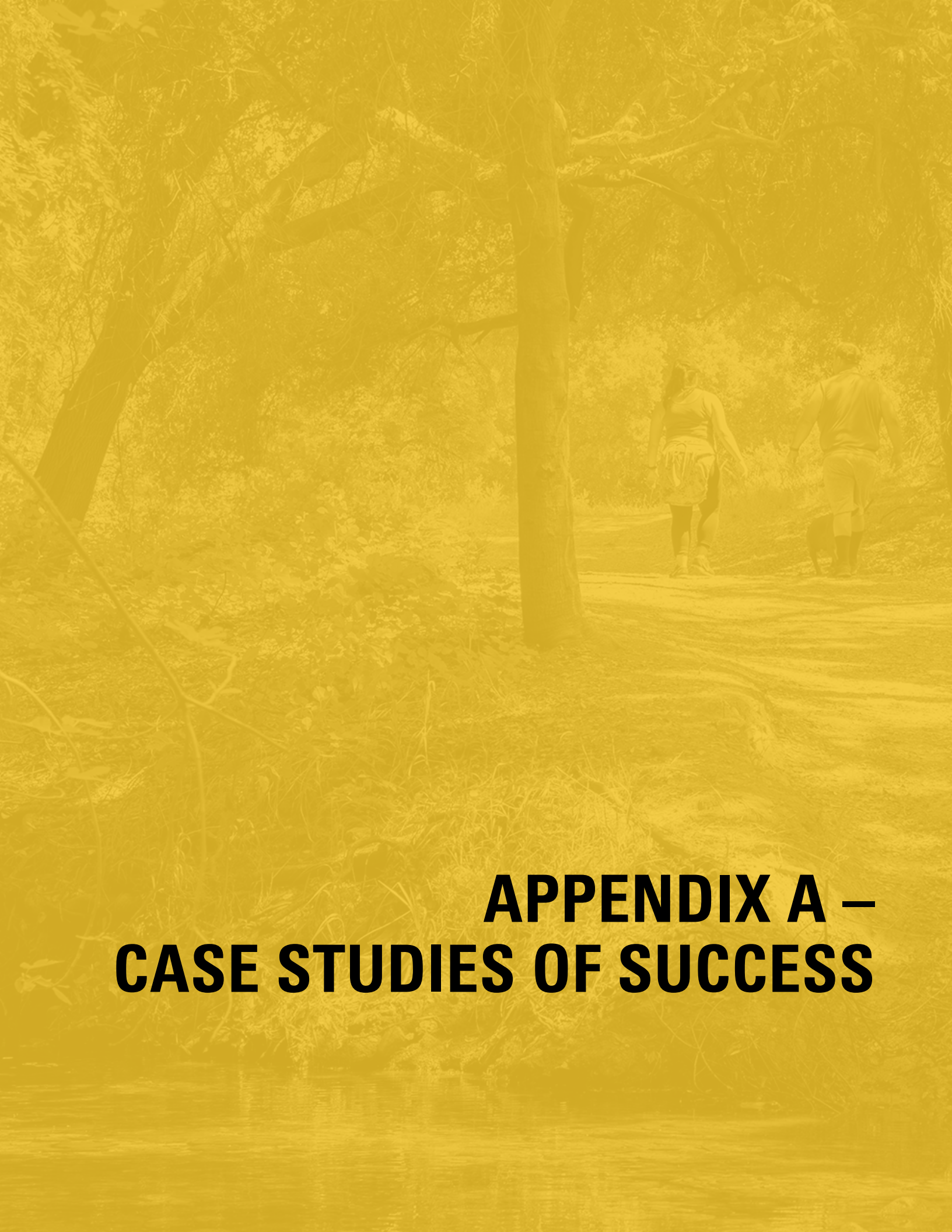

APPENDIX A – CASE STUDIES OF SUCCESS

AMARGOSA CREEK RECHARGE PROJECT AND AMARGOSA CREEK NATURAL TRAIL ENHANCEMENT PROJECT CASE STUDY

I. WATER NEEDS PRESENT PROJECT OPPORTUNITIES

In the City of Palmdale, two project development teams saw the opportunity to coordinate a water recharge project and habitat mitigation efforts with a trail enhancement project—with the ultimate goal of providing intersecting benefits for the community.[1] The City of Palmdale, like many areas in Southern California, invests in water conservation strategies to mitigate ongoing drought and looks for ways to improve parks and open space. To address these considerations, two projects were developed in proximity and partnership along Amargosa Creek.

The first project, the Upper Amargosa Creek Recharge Project (Recharge Project), was completed in 2020 and helps to address drought conditions in the area. The project aims to reduce reliance on imported water while undertaking habitat improvements. Nearby, the Amargosa Creek Natural Trail Enhancement Project (Trail Enhancement Project), which is estimated to break ground in 2025, will build upon existing trail networks in the region and bring additional recreation amenities to the community.[2]

II. PROJECT COORDINATION

Project teams, which included the City of Palmdale, State of California Department of Water Resources, Los Angeles County Water District, Palmdale Water District, and Antelope Valley East Kern Water Agency (AVEK), working on the Recharge Project and Trail Enhancement Project saw an opportunity to maximize the City's investments through co-located projects. The Recharge Project was initially developed to improve groundwater levels for the City of Palmdale and provide habitat restoration for the area. Groundwater levels had been declining by about 200 feet a year since the 1990s and were exacerbated by ongoing drought.[3] The Recharge Project sought to expand AVEK's water supply portfolio by recharging about 1,600-2,350 acre- feet of water per year. This expansion would reduce the area's reliance on imported water from the State Water Project.[4, 5] The Recharge Project was completed in 2020 but disturbed local habitat in its construction. As part of the project's approval, the California Department of Fish and Wildlife required habitat mitigation of 25 acres along Amargosa Creek.[6, 7] This habitat mitigation effort included restoration of juniper tree woodland, Joshua tree woodland, rubber rabbitbrush scrub, and enhancement of California buckwheat scrub, and Great Basin sage scrub.[8]

Adjacent to the site of the Recharge Project is a trail system that connects to nearby foothills. The Trail Enhancement Project builds upon and expands this existing network. The Trail Enhancement Project is still underway but once completed, it will span 50 acres of habitat, preserving juniper and Joshua trees. It will also provide residents with hiking trail improvements, new trailheads, picnic tables, educational signage, fitness equipment, bicycle repair infrastructure, and fishing and camping opportunities.[9]

III. GOVERNMENTAL AGENCY COLLABORATION

The development of the Recharge Project and Trail Enhancement Project is a testament to the benefits that can be realized when government agencies coordinate and collaborate. Without collaboration and funds from various agencies, the projects likely would not have been developed.

Project partners for the Recharge Project included the City of Palmdale, the State of California Department of Water Resources, Los Angeles County Water District, and Antelope Valley East Kern Water Agency (AVEK). Thanks to this partnership, the Recharge Project was completed for a budget of $16 million.

Funding sources for the Recharge Project include:[10]

- $6,500,000 from Proposition 1E. Proposition 1E funds stormwater management projects and is managed by the Department of Water Resources.[11]
- $3,000,000 from the City of Palmdale
- $2,500,000 from Antelope Valley East Kern Water Agency
- $1,250,000 from LA County Water District
- $1,250,000 from Palmdale Water District

The Trail Enhancement Project was led by the City of Palmdale. Funding sources for the Trail Enhancement Project include:[12, 13]

» $1,000,000 from Measure A under the City Natural Lands, Local Beaches, Water Conservation and Protection grant and an additional $780,000 contribution from the City of Palmdale. Measure A funds projects that improve and protect open space, watersheds, and water resources through the acquisition, development, improvement, and restoration of multi-benefit projects.

IV. ACHIEVEMENTS AND LESSONS LEARNED

Governmental agency collaboration can lead to more robust funding

Having multiple government agencies collaborate on the Recharge Project opened opportunities to apply to multiple funding sources, which made the ambitious project a reality.

Water recharge is proving successful

Thanks to the collaboration of the project team, the Recharge Project has already started to successfully recharge the local aquifer and store water for future use during times of drought.[14] The Recharge Project also intends to utilize recycled water (if allowed) for homes and businesses within the area.[15]

Identifying complementary projects led to more community benefits

Coordination of the Recharge Project and Trail Enhancement Project by the City of Palmdale and various project partners exemplifies how drought and habitat mitigation and enhancement projects can work together to provide increased community benefits. Investment in both projects will result in increased water resilience and improved recreation opportunities in the community for years to come.

Credit: Visit Palmdale

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CINDY MONTAÑEZ NATURAL PARK CASE STUDY

I. FROM A DUMPING GROUND TO A MULTI-BENEFIT PARK

Situated along the Pacoima Wash in the City of San Fernando, Cindy Montañez Natural Park provides 4.75 acres of green space to the surrounding community. Originally called the Pacoima Wash Natural Park, the park was renamed in 2023 to honor the late San Fernando Council Member Cindy Montañez.[1] The Northeast San Fernando Valley is densely populated and partially industrial, and residents have faced issues with industrial pollution and lack of open space. The site that is now Cindy Montañez Park was previously a vacant lot used as an illegal dumping ground, which negatively impacted both the surrounding environment and community.[2] Mountains Recreation and Conservation Authority (MRCA) and the City of San Fernando partnered to transform it into a unique space that would provide multiple benefits for the neighborhood.[3]

Cindy Montañez Park's features create social benefits and recreational opportunities for the surrounding community. Space for picnicking, bird watching, and gathering are dispersed throughout the park and are linked by a half-mile trail for walking and jogging. Other amenities include shade structures and arbors, turf for free play, educational signage, and an entrance plaza that has an area for seating and public gatherings. These features promote recreation and engagement with the park and others.

Cindy Montañez Park's environmental amenities, such as its sophisticated stormwater management system, surround and enhance its recreational amenities. A prominent and innovative feature of the park is two placitas, which are small circular concrete plazas designed in the Spanish mission style. They discreetly swirl, slow down, and pass runoff through a system of grates and filters, then divert it into a stony creek bed parallel to the Pacoima Wash. This bed acts as a bioswale, where the runoff percolates into the ground and helps replenish the San Fernando Groundwater Basin. Cindy Montañez Park was one of the first in Los Angeles County to integrate stormwater management in this manner; the placitas are aesthetically pleasing and blend seamlessly with other park elements while capturing up to 371,000 gallons of water from a 33-acre area.

Cindy Montañez Park is also defined by its plant palette, featuring riparian and drought-tolerant plants that are native to the Los Angeles River Watershed, as well as a wildflower meadow. This landscaping is not only visually pleasing but creates habitat for and facilitates the movement of wildlife, primarily bird species.[4,5]

II. TRANSFORMING A VACANT AND POLLUTED PARCEL INTO A PARK

The dumping ground before Cindy Montañez Park

The Pacoima Wash was constructed in the 1940s as a 10-mile-long flood control channel. It was a purely utilitarian conduit for water and was fenced off from the surrounding communities. Prior to Cindy Montañez Park, the Pacoima Wash was considered unclean and hazardous as it was typically filled with trash and polluted runoff from the urban surface water that entered it from many culverts when it rained.[6] This water carried litter, sediment from construction sites, nutrients and bacteria from pet waste and fertilizers, heavy metals from automobile parts, household building materials, and other pollutants. 8th St, the property near the Pacoima Wash that would become Cindy Montañez Park, was often littered with garbage and abandoned home appliances.

In addition to being a hotspot for runoff pollution, the Pacoima Wash was one of several physical barriers in the area that impeded efficient travel and contributed to air pollution. The neighborhood surrounding Cindy Montañez Park lies at the intersection of freeways, railroad tracks, industrial buildings, and the Pacoima Wash. These elements created barriers for transit-dependent residents and pedestrians to navigate their neighborhood. It was difficult for residents to connect to each other and to park space, despite San Fernando being near other green spaces, such as the Angeles National Forest.[7]

Credit: Mountains Recreation & Conservation Authority

The development of Cindy Montañez Park

Cindy Montañez Park was conceptualized as a part of an effort to create a multi-purpose greenway, which is a corridor of undeveloped land preserved for recreation or environmental protection, along the Pacoima Wash to simultaneously address its environmental, social, and health challenges. In 2003, the cities of San Fernando and Los Angeles commissioned a planning study by Cal Poly Pomona's Landscape Architecture Program to design a greenway along the Pacoima Wash.[8] The study included a series of community outreach surveys and workshops to gain input and support from stakeholders for converting the Pacoima Wash into a multi-purpose amenity.[9] This process received overwhelming public interest and support, and resulted in the adoption of the study by the City of San Fernando as the Pacoima Wash Greenway Master Plan for improvements along the Wash.[10]

In April of 2005, MRCA released the Pacoima Wash Greenway Plan which included plans for a park on the 8th St property. MRCA purchased this property after the community objected to a proposal to convert the property into a storage facility.[11] Representatives from MRCA met with the City's ad hoc Pacoima Wash Committee and City staff to request that the City apply for grant funding for the park's planning and construction. In July of the same year, the City applied for the Proposition 50 Grant Program, and in 2006, MRCA was awarded the grant.[12] Construction on the park began in 2008 but was halted a few months later due to the California state bond freeze. In 2011, MRCA resumed construction, and the park was opened to the public in 2014.[13]

The opening of Cindy Montañez Park

The opening of Cindy Montañez Park elicited a sense of pride in the community. Then-Senator Kevin de Leon told the Los Angeles Times, "For too long, green parks and open space were an entitlement for certain parts of our city, certain parts of our state. In Latino communities, there are no parks or open space … Our children deserve access to open space".[14] Cindy Montañez Park brought beautiful, open green space to a neglected and polluted parcel of land.

The construction of the park initiated a broader effort led by community groups to create a greenway along the entire length of the Pacoima Wash. Namely, Pacoima Beautiful created the Pacoima Wash Vision Plan in 2012, which presented plans for greenways in Pacoima and Sylmar that would link with Cindy Montañez Park.[15]

III. CROSS-AGENCY PARTNERSHIPS

The collaboration between MRCA, which is a joint powers authority, and the City of San Fernando was crucial in successfully planning, constructing, and operating the park. The two parties signed a memorandum of understanding in 2008 before commencing construction, which helped clearly define their roles. MRCA would take full responsibility for the design, development, and construction of the park, as well as maintenance—including landscaping and other park elements such as benches or trash receptacles—for a three-year period. At the end of this period, they would assist the City in finding another organization to assume maintenance duties. The City of San Fernando would agree to full cooperation during the development and construction of the park, including waiving associated fees. The City would also install irrigation and potable water services in the park, as well as provide street sweeping services to the placitas and maintenance to the sediment traps.[16]

IV. FUNDING CINDY MONTAÑEZ PARK

The total cost for the planning, engineering, and construction of Cindy Montañez Park was $3.4 million. The three main funding sources that contributed to this were:

- $1,634,183 from Proposition 50: The Water Security, Clean Drinking Water, Coastal and Beach Protection Bond Act of 2002. $1,061,858 was granted by Santa Monica Mountains Conservancy (SMMC), while $572,325 was from the California Department of Water Resources' Integrated Regional Water Management Plan funding, a collaborative effort to implement water management solutions on a regional scale.
- $1.2M from Proposition 84: The Safe Drinking Water, Water Quality and Supply, Flood Control, River and Coastal Protection Bond Act of 2006. This funding was granted by SMMC.
- $100,000 from Supervisorial District 3: This funding was used to purchase and plant about 150 new trees.[17,18]

V. ACHIEVEMENTS AND LESSONS LEARNED

Multi-benefit infrastructure is crucial

Cindy Montañez Park is a model of how to create multi-benefit infrastructure that helps address critical regional water issues while providing much-needed park space in Los Angeles' urban areas. Space is often scarce in Los Angeles County and existing infrastructure, like the Pacoima Wash, can present opportunities for park development, but come with their own challenges.

Communities also have various social, recreational, and environmental needs that can be challenging to address. However, Cindy Montañez Park seamlessly addresses these environmental and social needs in San Fernando by incorporating infrastructure to clean water and garbage pollution and recharge the groundwater while providing social and recreational opportunities, demonstrating that parks can and should provide multi-benefits.

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EARVIN "MAGIC" JOHNSON RECREATION AREA CASE STUDY

I. A WORLD-CLASS PARK FOR AN UNDERSERVED COMMUNITY

Earvin "Magic" Johnson Recreation Area (EMJ) is a critical community resource that provides space for recreation, community events, and environmental benefits for the wider region. EMJ is located in Willowbrook, a high park need neighborhood in South Los Angeles.[1] This dense residential area is home to a quarter million youth living within a five-mile radius.[2] The park has undergone various renovations with the most recent renovation completed in 2022.[3,4] Encompassing over 100 acres, the park was once an oil storage site and then a housing site. EMJ now features green space for recreation as well as a community center, outdoor classrooms, wedding area, computer lab, game room, dog park, educational native garden, outdoor amphitheater, picnic areas, children's play area, splash pad, fitness equipment, and walking trails.[5] In addition to these community benefits, the park employs innovative water recycling practices at the lake which provide numerous environmental benefits.[6]

II. TOXIC CONDITIONS IMPACT PARK SITE

The site of EMJ has undergone several transformations in its evolution from oil field to park. From the 1920s through the 1960s, the site was home to an oil processing and storage facility despite its proximity to residential areas.[7] After the oil field ceased operations, part of the site became home to Ujima Village (Ujima) in the 1970s. Home to approximately 600 renters and owners, Ujima offered an opportunity for working-class Black families to be homeowners.[8] Ujima Village was situated next to EMJ for a number of years and residents had access to the pre-renovation park space.[9]

The dream of Ujima did not last and conditions at the site left lasting impacts on a community in need. Ujima fell into disrepair by the 1990s and was taken over by LA County. The Department of Housing and Urban Development conducted an environmental investigation where they found chemicals on the site but determined they did not pose a significant threat to the health of residents. However, a civil lawsuit detailed how tenants living at the site were collectively getting sick, with 38 deaths tied to the contamination of the site.[10] In 2007, the Regional Water Board issued an order to the County Housing Authority and ExxonMobil directing assessment, monitoring, and cleanup of the site consistent with the US Environmental Protection Agency's requirements. This required residents to relocate, and many had to leave the area due to relocation funds not covering the cost of homes in the area.[11] By 2008, LA County was ordered to clean up the site and Ujima was closed.[12]

III. COMMUNITY FEEDBACK SHAPES PARK FEATURES

Community feedback shaped the design process of EMJ and ultimately resulted in features that better meet community needs. Prior to the renovation, EMJ was heavily used despite its state of disrepair due to poor maintenance.[13] The Department of Parks and Recreation underwent a robust community engagement process during the master planning and design phase of the park's renovation. Several community engagement events took place at the nearby Athens Park and at EMJ. Local community churches were instrumental in driving participation to engagement events.[14]

Community members were presented with multiple design options and potential park features. The community center, which was a $22 million construction project, was central to the project.[15] The center has helped create space for community organizations to host events and implement programming. Community member feedback also impacted the location and inclusion of proposed park features. Moving the location of the dog park to a different side of the site was in direct response to community members' desire for an off-leash dog park, the first of its kind in South LA. The park design initially included an equestrian center, which was removed due to concerns from residents about smell and noise.[16]

IV. ROBUST FUNDING PAVES THE WAY FOR A CUTTING-EDGE PARK

Renovating EMJ from the once polluted oil farm and shepherding it through various iterations that did not fully meet community needs was no small feat. The most recent renovation phase of EMJ carried an $83 million price tag with all phases of the renovation project estimated to cost $135 million.[17,18] Funding sources for this massive renovation effort included: [19,20]

- $28 million from LA County Public Works
- Proposition O: Clean Water Bond which funds projects that prevent and remove pollutants from regional waterways and oceans.[21]

Funding sources for future renovation phases include:[22,23]

- $3.74 million from Measure A which provides funding for capital improvement projects under the Community-based Park Investment Program and Neighborhood Parks, Healthy Communities, & Urban Greening Program through the collection of a parcel tax.

V. ACHIEVEMENTS AND LESSONS LEARNED

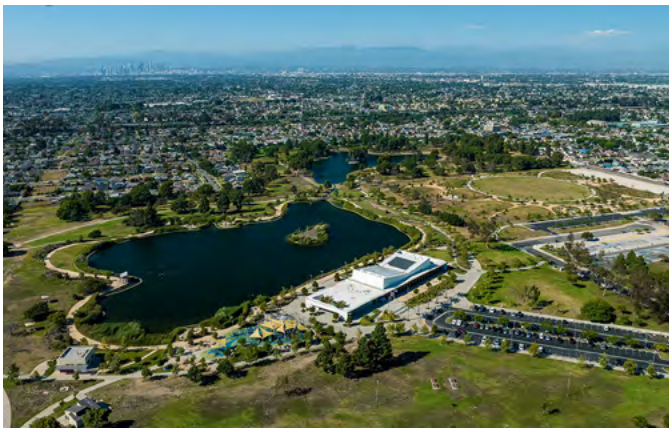
Innovative water recycling practices

Today, the recycled water lake at EMJ is one of its defining and most successful features. It was also an inspired engineering and design decision that solved a funding and environmental challenge. Originally, the landscape design team thought they would have to drain the lake due to concerns with groundwater pollution infiltrating the lake. However, securing funding from LA County Public Works facilitated the decision to make the lake a net zero recycled water system. It was less expensive to introduce a recycled water system than it would be to drain the lake. This decision freed up about half of the anticipated budget for other park features, many of which were covered by Proposition O.[24]

The recycled water system treats stormwater from the Compton Creek watershed to remove pollutants and bacteria, replenish the lake's water, and irrigate the park's landscaping. Any excess recycled water is released back into Compton Creek.[25] This system helps to mitigate coastal pollution.[26] Maintaining EMJ's lake and restoring the wetlands has also introduced new habitat for fish and birds, with new species of birds sighted at the park by ornithologists.[27]

Operations and maintenance funding challenges and successes

Many parks in Los Angeles struggle with securing long-term funding for operations and maintenance. EMJ has had some recent success. In 2023, Public Works applied to and was awarded funding from the LA County Safe Clean Water Program to help fund the ongoing maintenance of the park's stormwater features and to fund additional park enhancements.[28]



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LINEAR PARKS CASE STUDY

I. WHAT ARE LINEAR PARKS?

Often built along facilities such as electrical lines, railroads, roadways, or waterfronts, linear parks are unique from other parks in that they are significantly longer than they are wide. Despite their non-traditional shape, linear parks can effectively connect neighborhoods, give opportunities for exercise and recreation, and provide access to urgently needed green space in urban areas. Due to its relatively small and narrow footprint, this park typology is particularly effective at providing green space in dense urban environments with limited open space.

II. SMALL FOOTPRINT, BIG IMPACT

Located on a narrow, formerly unused parcel of land directly adjacent to the I-105 freeway in Lynwood, California, Senator Ricardo Lara Linear Park is a strong example of how to transform a small or underutilized parcel of land into a space for recreation and well-being. Completed in 2016, Ricardo Lara Park is a 5.2-acre park spanning a length of approximately one mile.[1] At just 45 feet wide, the park highlights how municipalities can take advantage of seemingly limited and undesirable open space. Transformed from a long strip of dirt encompassing five city blocks into a linear park, this narrow plot of land is now a community asset that serves more than 26,000 neighbors in Lynwood and improves social cohesion throughout the neighborhood by providing space for community gatherings.

This project highlights how linear parks can remedy the negative impacts of freeways built in the 20th century. The park features include landscaping, a community garden, fitness stations, play structures, a different theme for each city block, and a series of plaques that tell the story of Lynwood's history.[2] These features have improved connectivity and a sense of community while simultaneously reducing environmental and health burdens in Lynwood.

III. RECLAIMING THE LAND

When the I-105 freeway was constructed in the 1990s, it cut directly through the predominantly working-class city of Lynwood, severing the community and exacerbating environmental, health, and economic burdens for residents. The freeway reduced walkability in the neighborhood while simultaneously increasing harmful pollutants from automobiles. The park is located within a census tract that is now in the 93rd percentile statewide for pollution burden, with extremely high exposure to diesel particulate matter, particulate matter 2.5, and other toxic releases.[3]

In 2002, the city of Lynwood took a step towards ameliorating these harms by purchasing the property from Caltrans at a significant discount.[4] The City's redevelopment agency originally bought the property for a future residential housing development, but a feasibility study determined that the site was not a good fit.[5] After letting the property sit idle for several years, the City shifted gears and began planning a linear park on the unused site.

In 2010, the City started conducting community outreach to turn the vacant property into a park.[6] Project staff noted that the City was very intentional about engagement to ensure that the surrounding community felt a sense of ownership over the project.[7] The outreach team went door to door to invite residents to the site and gather feedback on the design. The City incorporated feedback from the community on how to reduce the harm caused by the freeway, and the community suggested providing a community garden, a community gathering space, green space, and opportunities to walk or exercise.[8] The community was also heavily involved in the design and creation of the artistic elements of the park; the park even includes mosaics that incorporate drawings and designs from the community.

Credit: Jonnu Singleton

IV. FUNDING

The City of Lynwood relied on a combination of internal and external funding sources to complete the project:

- $3,949,957 from Proposition 84: The Safe Drinking Water, Water Quality and Supply, Flood Control, River and Coastal Protection Bond Act (Prop 84) provides funding for projects that provide safe drinking water, protect the public from flooding, protect waters of the State from pollution and habitat destruction, protect coastal areas for future generations, and provide for sustainable and livable communities through urban greening.[9]
- $1,579,238 from the City of Lynwood: This funding comes from a variety of sources, including their "Art of Public Places" program and general fund dollars.

OTHER LINEAR PARKS

V. VETERANS PARK

Veterans Park, a half-mile linear park in the city of Huntington Park, is another excellent example of how the region can convert underutilized corridors into vibrant, linear community parks. Located underneath high-voltage power lines, Veterans Park shows how municipalities can creatively maximize existing infrastructure and build multi-use public spaces. Measuring just fifty feet wide and over half a mile long, the park's unique footprint allowed it to take advantage of the compact and seemingly unusable land under the existing power lines. This design provides a blueprint for how other municipalities can use existing infrastructure to create more green space. Largely funded through the California Natural Resources Agency's Urban Greening Program, the park features bioswales, a biking trail, fitness stations, and a playground.[10] The northern end of the park is located just two blocks from Metro's future Southeast Gateway light rail line, thus serving as a key first-last mile connection that will benefit communities serviced by the future line.

Credit: Joe Linton/Streetsblog L.A.

Credit: Chris Greenspon/SBLA

VI. MERCED AVENUE LINEAR PARK

The City of El Monte recently completed Merced Avenue Linear Park, a quarter-mile linear park doubling as a street median and designed to increase safety and park space in a park-poor community. Before El Monte built this linear park, Merced Avenue looked like countless other wide residential streets in SoCal that encourage speeding and discourage pedestrian use. Because this kind of roadway is so prevalent in the region, municipalities in LA County have ample opportunities to implement this park typology. Linear parks in street medians can be an effective way for municipalities to improve existing automobile infrastructure while increasing desperately needed green space in LA County. The park features picnic tables, tree canopy, space for walking and cycling, and landscaping to capture and clean water runoff.[11] This small park replaces a neighborhood street that suffered from hostile pedestrian infrastructure and frequent reports of speeding.[12] Funded by Measure W, this multi-benefit park makes the street safer for pedestrians, provides community gathering spaces, and replenishes the region's groundwater with sustainable infrastructure features.[13]

VII. ACHIEVEMENTS AND LESSONS LEARNED

Urban areas in LA County often lack significant open space to build new parks, but the region has opportunities to reclaim underutilized land to give back to the people. Linear parks offer a promising solution to the countless park-poor communities throughout LA County that have been negatively affected by the construction of highways or other infrastructure. Dozens of highways, waterways, and utility lines bisect communities throughout the County, leaving behind small, underutilized parcels owned by public agencies. Advocates can use successful linear park projects as examples of what's possible on these leftover parcels.

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NOGALES PARK CASE STUDY

I. A SMALL SPACE WITH A BIG IMPACT

At just one half-acre in size, Nogales Park has had a significant positive impact on its surrounding neighborhood. The park is located in the community of Walnut Park, a densely populated and highly urbanized neighborhood about five miles south of Downtown Los Angeles. When Supervisor Hilda Solis made a motion to the Board of Supervisors in 2019 to acquire the site, it was one of the last two undeveloped parcels in the community.[1,2] It was also within a half-mile walk for over 13,000 people, including 4,000 youth.[3] The County of Los Angeles Department of Parks and Recreation (LA County Parks) and the Department of Public Works (DPW) partnered to ensure that this space would be maximized to provide the greatest benefit to residents of Walnut Park.[4]

Nogales Park provides recreational amenities and programming for the residents of Walnut Park. These amenities include walking paths, benches, fitness stations, a playground, a splash pad, a picnic area, and restrooms.[5] These features offer a combination of active and passive opportunities for recreation, serving the diverse needs of the surrounding neighborhood. LA County Parks staff have observed a variety of community members using the park in their daily routines. Some use Nogales as a part of their morning rituals, going for walks, reading the newspaper, and drinking coffee, while others use the space to play and bond with their children and grandchildren. Community members have also organized recreational opportunities in the space such as dance and yoga groups. The park has a small LA County Parks office onsite which assists community members with organizing events and other needs that is unique to Nogales Park.[6]

The recreational amenities of Nogales Park blend seamlessly with the environmental ones. Its sophisticated stormwater management system can capture and filter up to 3.2 million gallons of water annually through underground infiltration dry wells, reducing bacteria and metal pollutants entering the Los Angeles River.[7] The park also features 38 drought-tolerant native trees that have the potential to sequester about 81,000 pounds of carbon dioxide collectively over their lifetime, as well as a shade structure that provides relief from the heat for visitors.[8] All the features of Nogales Park help create a healthier Walnut Park.

II. NOGALES PARK SERVES A HIGH-NEED COMMUNITY

Before Nogales Park was constructed, Walnut Park did not have dedicated park space, which may have negatively impacted the community's health. The impact of low green or park space to a community's health was underscored by the 2016 Los Angeles County Department of Public Health study titled Parks and Public Health in Los Angeles County that aimed to "assess park space per capita in relation to premature mortality from cardiovascular disease (heart disease and stroke) and diabetes, childhood obesity prevalence, community level economic hardship, and race/ethnicity in cities and unincorporated communities across Los Angeles County." This study found that Walnut Park was one of the most park-poor areas in LA County, ranking 116 out of 120 cities and communities in park space per capita. Correlated to the lack of park space, it scored in the 4th quartile for measures of diabetes, premature mortality (years of potential life lost per 100,000), and childhood obesity prevalence, demonstrating the negative impact associated with a lack of parks in the community.[9] Before Nogales Park, Walnut Park's sole open space was a 4.5-acre playground for the local elementary school that was only open to the rest of the community for a few hours each day.[10] The construction and opening of Nogales Park was a critical step towards a healthier neighborhood.

Nogales Park was the first park where LA County Parks and DPW partnered on both construction and maintenance for a new build. The two agencies frequently collaborate on projects, such as Measure W infrastructure upgrades at existing parks, but at Nogales Park, the park amenities and stormwater infrastructure were constructed simultaneously.

By collaborating, LA County Parks and DPW shared costs that were not covered by grant funding. These include the implementation and capital construction of the park, operations and maintenance, and labor. The two agencies share funding streams and oversee the park to ensure that equipment and other features remain functional and safe.

III. DESIGNING THE PARK COLLABORATIVELY WITH THE COMMUNITY

Since the site for Nogales Park was a blank slate, LA County Parks conducted extensive community outreach to design the park. Parks are rarely built on a site mostly free of existing infrastructure. Therefore, LA County Parks wanted to maximize this opportunity and ensure that Walnut Park residents actively helped shape the space that would become Nogales Park.

To kick off community engagement, LA County Parks staff began by disseminating their plans to turn the empty parcel into a park through several forms of outreach. They conducted multilingual outreach to the community through surveys and flyers and canvassed the neighborhood to engage with residents. LA County Parks also connected with trusted community organizations by contacting organizations that had advocated for a park space in the neighborhood and attended community meetings and events hosted by local groups, such as the YWCA and neighborhood watch.

Following this initial outreach, LA County Parks hosted their own meetings and hands-on workshops where participants discussed what they wanted to see for the space. These workshops invited community members to work in small groups to choose and arrange to-scale cutouts of various potential park features. Groups then presented their designs and explained their reasoning to the other groups. This led to attendees collaborating with each other until they reached a consensus on a design for Nogales Park.[11]

IV. FUNDING SOURCES

At the start of construction, Nogales Park was estimated to cost $9.8 million.[12] Four main funding sources were pooled to construct the park, including:

- $4,322,842 from Proposition 68: The California Drought, Water, Parks, Climate, Coastal Protection, and Outdoor Access for All Act of 2018. This proposition was intended to fund projects that plan, develop, and implement climate adaptation and resiliency projects, including those that create or rehabilitate state or local parks, provide flood protection, protect natural resources and water supply, and improve water quality.[13]
- $1.26 million from Proposition 1: The Water Quality, Supply, and Infrastructure Improvement Act of 2014. This measure was intended to fund projects that provide more reliable water supplies, restore important species and habitats, and develop a more resilient and sustainably managed water system that can better withstand environmental pressures in the coming decades.[14]
- $300,000 from Supervisorial District 1: This funding was awarded to use towards environmental studies, community outreach, and site development.[15]

LA County Parks and DPW covered the remaining costs of construction and presently fund the operations and maintenance of Nogales Park.[16]

Credit: County of Los Angeles Department of Parks and Recreation, (LA County Parks)

V. ACHIEVEMENTS AND LESSONS LEARNED

Overall, Nogales Park offers lessons in partnerships and maximizing space that could help create other successful park projects, especially in communities with high park needs and limited available park space.

Partnerships create successful parks

In terms of partnerships, the collaboration between LA County Parks and DPW was extremely beneficial because it lessened the burden of construction and maintenance on both agencies. Additionally, by partnering with the community early in the process, LA County Parks was able to increase both the quantity and quality of their outreach. The agency reached a significant portion of the neighborhood by engaging with the community early on in the process and through multiple existing relationships. This gave an equitable amount of decision-making power regarding what the park would look like to the community.

Multi-use features maximize limited space

The multi-use features of Nogales Park maximize their benefits. For example, the park includes a splash pad for use on hot summer days, but because the water nozzles are not obstructive, this space can double as a small amphitheater, where community members gather for events or organized recreation. To increase accessibility, LA County Parks also constructed a small office at Nogales Park that is regularly staffed. The consistent presence of staff at the park ensures the consistency of the park's maintenance and facilitates the arrangement of resident-led programming or events.

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RUDY ORTEGA SR. PARK CASE STUDY

I. A PARK SHOWCASING SAN FERNANDO'S RICH INDIGENOUS HISTORY

Rudy Ortega Sr. Park is a unique example of how a partnership between a Tribal government and a local government can reinstate land sovereignty and stewardship for Native Tribes, while increasing community access to green space. Located in downtown San Fernando, the 3.5-acre park is located on the historical site of the Fernandeño Tataviam Band of Mission Indians' (FTBMI's) village of Patzkunga. The FTBMI were unjustly dispossessed of these lands in the 1700s by Spanish, Mexican, and American colonization.[1] The Tribe's leadership with this park is one step towards a land back movement in LA County.

Previously known as Heritage Park, the City of San Fernando partnered with the FTBMI to upgrade the park site in the early 2000s. The Tribe shaped the restoration to incorporate elements that reflected the Tribe's cultural heritage into the park, such as native and drought-tolerant plants, a replicated traditional village, and interpretive signage. Through a continued partnership with the City, the FTBMI holds key access and maintenance authorities over the park. This access means that the Tribe can host Tribal events, cultural celebrations, and educational events with the larger San Fernando community without the restrictions typically imposed on non-city groups.

II. RECKONING WITH LAND DISPOSSESSION

Rudy Ortega Sr. Park is located on a site with a cultural history far pre-dating the City of San Fernando. The park—and the entire City of San Fernando—are located within the ancestral lands of the FTBMI, a native sovereign nation from northern Los Angeles County.[2] These lands include the San Fernando, Santa Clarita, and Simi Valleys.[3] To this day, their tribal administration is headquartered in the City of San Fernando. The village the park site is located on, known as Patzkunga or "place with water", was sited due to a nearby natural spring.[4] Following periods of colonization and land dispossession by both the Spanish and Mexican governments, FTBMI Tribal Captain Rogerio Rocha came to own the site with the spring through a land grant from the Mexican government.[5]

However, the dispossession of FTBMI members repeated as the American government continued its settler colonial project of westward expansion. In 1874, Captain Rocha was forcibly removed from his land when then-state legislator Charles Maclay purchased 56,000 acres of land that included Rocha's property, known then as Rancho San Fernando. Rocha's land was particularly valuable due to the water source located there.[6] Through this acquisition, Maclay would be known to history as the founder of the City of San Fernando. His name can be found on San Fernando's schools and

Credit: Fernandeño Tataviam Band of Mission Indians

main street, while the Tribe's presence and history was reduced.[7] Despite this, members of the Tribe continued using the natural spring on the site into the 1960s when it was fenced off.

In the early 2000s, San Fernando Mayor Cindy Montañez approached the FTBMI to discuss opportunities for the City to begin a process of repair for previous injustices. At the time, the Tribe lacked a permanent location where it could host tribal events that are essential to their cultural practices. The two parties explored opportunities to transfer the land back to the Tribe but this option was infeasible due to political factors at the time. Instead, the City partnered with the Tribe to serve as an advisor to redesign and upgrade the park. After seeking funding for several years, upgrades to the park began in 2008.

The FTBMI's leadership took multiple roles throughout the project. During the park's construction, Tribal members were deployed as Native American Monitors—experts in preserving sacred tribal artifacts during earth-disturbing activities—and as an educational partner to the City.[8] Following the project's completion, this partnership grew through a Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) between the City and the Tribe. This MOU granted the Tribe access and stewardship responsibilities over the park. Through this process of partnership and shared expertise, some of the sovereignty of the land that was stripped from the FTBMI had been restored.

III. MAKING INDIGENOUS HISTORY VISIBLE

Rudy Ortega Sr. Park honors the rich history of both the FTBMI and the City of San Fernando through its design, naming, and functions. When updating the park, the Tribe envisioned it to have a "balanced, low maintenance ecosystem" that resembled what the area may have looked like centuries ago.[9] The park's facilities include a simulated traditional FTBMI village, as well as a Japanese tea house, a mission-style plaza, a restored historic water tower, and a small amphitheater.[10] Some of the natural features of the park include drought-tolerant native plants, native trees, and walking trails that link these features together.[11]

The park has had positive impacts on both the FTBMI and the wider San Fernando community. Firstly, the park was renamed to increase the FTBMI's visibility in the City and honor the legacy of late FTBMI Chief Rudy Ortega Sr. Tribal Chief Ortega Sr. was a lifelong advocate for the Tribe's recognition from the federal government and historical land rights.[12] Secondly, the park provides a much-needed gathering space for the Tribe. The Tribe often hosts meetings and tribal celebrations at the facility. Additionally, the park serves as an educational space for the Tribe to educate the broader San Fernando community on the Tribe's history and stewardship practices.

IV. AN IMPACTFUL PARTNERSHIP BETWEEN THE FTBMI AND THE CITY

A joint MOU between the City and the FTBMI was crucial to increasing the agency of the Tribe to develop, access, and maintain Rudy Ortega Sr. Park. However, the Tribe has to use intermediary organizations as signatories on the MOU. The FTBMI is currently not recognized by the federal government as a "domestic dependent nation." Native American tribes with federal recognition are engaged on a government-to-government basis and provides access to federal funds, services, and protection of sovereignty.[13] It is worth noting that the Tribe has been petitioning for federal recognition since 1843; their pursuit is still active with a recent petition filed in 2024.[14] With the Tribe's current status, they must use associated nonprofits to receive grant money or enter partnerships with local municipalities.[15] The MOU formalizes the relationship between the City and the Tribe's nonprofits.

The MOU was executed in 2009 and designated the FTBMI with authority over park maintenance, joint scheduling, and holding key access to the facility. Many of these duties fall outside of the typical ways that a government entity shares responsibility with a non-profit. These unique considerations created a more equal relationship between the City and the Tribe and helped to create a space that represented the Tribe's vision.

This agreement grants the Tribe the ability to freely host Tribal events and steward the park under their auspices, rather than working through the City. Because they have authority over scheduling and access to the space, the FTBMI can host events ranging from government meetings to informal community gatherings without having to pay fees or acquire permits. The MOU also designates the Tribe as being responsible for the maintenance of the park. While park maintenance is a budgetary challenge for many government entities, taking on the maintenance responsibilities has presented the FTBMI opportunities for workforce development and cultural stewardship. It supports their growing Tribal Conservation Corps with a site to train new workers and most importantly means the Tribe can steward to the land in alignment with their cultural practices.

While the MOU provides a framework for the City and Tribe to collaborate, it also has its challenges. Because the Tribe had to rely on its associated non-profits to enter this MOU, the Tribe is treated as a non-profit rather than a government entity. However, the Tribe is a Native Sovereign Nation that has exercised its governance since before the establishment of the Spanish, Mexican, and American governments. They have a constitution, laws, a governance structure, staff members, and more. If the MOU viewed the Tribe as a government of equal standing, they would have greater autonomy over land management at the park site.

Nonetheless, this MOU between the FTBMI and the City had opened other opportunities for continued partnership. The FTBMI has formed a new MOU with the City of San Fernando to grant their Tiüvac'a'ai Tribal Conservation Corps access and shared maintenance responsibility of Cindy Montañez Park, another park located in San Fernando.[16] Additionally, the Tribe developed another citywide MOU for support on grants related to climate resilience and heat abatement. Going forward, the MOU framework offers a useful model, albeit with opportunities for improvement, for tribal and municipal partnerships.

V. ENGAGING THE WIDER COMMUNITY

There was a process of education required to shift San Fernando residents' perspectives on the Tribe's approach to land stewardship. When the park first opened, residents had misconceptions of the native plants in the park, referring to them as "weeds," because they were unfamiliar with these plants.[17] The park also faced challenges with native plant maintenance in its first few years, when some of the original native plants died because of irrigation challenges.[18]

Through community outreach events, the Tribe provided education on native plants to the broader San Fernando community. One of these events was the successful park restoration community event the FTBMI hosted in partnership with Tree People and the Theodore Payne Foundation in December 2021.[19] Enthusiastic volunteers, from families to college students, attended the event and helped successfully plant around 200 new native plants at the park, which were donated by the Theodore Payne Nursery and TreePeople.[20] During the event, the FTBMI educated community members on San Fernando's Indigenous history, the importance of native and drought-tolerant plants, and Indigenous approaches to environmental stewardship.[21] Utilizing the park as a gathering space provides the Tribe an avenue to educate and connect with San Fernando residents as well as to engage in cultural practices, ceremonies, and community traditions.

VI. ACHIEVEMENTS AND LESSONS LEARNED

Rudy Ortega Sr. Park is a strong model for Tribal and local government partnerships. The lessons learned here can show other cities how to address land back scenarios and create spaces for Indigenous groups' cultural activities while increasing access to green space.

Government-to-Government Partnerships with Tribes

The FTBMI faced some challenges in the development and implementation of the MOU with the City of San Fernando. Per the standard operating procedures regarding municipalities working with non-recognized tribes, the Tribe could only be represented through their non-profit. This is the case even though the FTBMI is a government entity that has its own governing structure, senate, and laws. Moving forward, governments and policymakers must engage all Tribes, regardless of recognition status, as governments on land management or land transfer opportunities. Still, the MOU framework offers an avenue through which a Tribe and local government entity can enter into a formal partnership.

It is also important for MOUs between local governments and Tribes to clearly define roles while leaving opportunities for expansion in the future. The MOU between the FTBMI and the City of San Fernando clearly outlined what role each entity would have in managing Rudy Ortega Sr. Park. Clearly defined roles and shared responsibilities and costs help strengthen an MOU between two entities. It is also important that there is procedural equity within MOUs, where both entities have a balanced set of shared duties and costs. The capacity of Tribal governments is likely to be very different from municipal agencies and requires flexibility in working methods.

Understanding Tribes' Land Back Capacity

The process for returning land back to Tribes occurs on a case-by-case basis, without much precedent or guidance. In an interview, the FTBMI shared that while land back initiatives are well-intentioned, the lack of structure can lead to unintended consequences. Entities should take into account the following considerations when exploring land back opportunities. These processes can be lengthy and require significant time and workload from the Tribal entity. Also, land back does not always look like a donation or no-cost transfer; land back may include Tribes purchasing the land. Regardless of the mechanism, FTBMI leadership emphasized that land back opportunities must be led by Tribes. Going forward, cities need to create opportunities for Tribes to lead land back processes and to be mindful of capacity when exploring these opportunities.

Cultural Practices

It is also important for local governments to understand Tribes' cultural practices. The FTBMI cited challenges with hosting Tribal celebrations at Rudy Ortega Sr. Park, such as baby showers, and needing to justify that these gatherings are Tribal sanctioned events. An event held by the Tribe, regardless of the content, is a Tribal event. Therefore, municipalities need to understand a Tribe's traditions and be flexible in their definitions as they enter into new MOUs regarding access.

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HILDA L. SOLIS AQUATIC CENTER CASE STUDY

I. RESPONDING TO A COMMUNITY'S NEED

Located in the unincorporated community of West Puente Valley, the Hilda L. Solis Aquatic Center will provide aquatic and recreation amenities to a high-need community. The lot previously housed Temple Academy which closed in 2020, and the Hacienda La Puente School District is now leasing the site to the County of Los Angeles Department of Parks and Recreation (LA County Parks) to operate and maintain the future park.[1] The future project will feature an Olympic-size pool, a practice pool, an aquatic center with changing rooms and classrooms, and a public park with a plaza, playground, walking path, and exercise equipment.[2]

In a community that lacks adequate access to aquatic facilities and where only 11.6% of the community goes swimming at least once every year, this aquatic center will provide affordable and accessible swimming opportunities for residents for years to come.[3] The Hilda L. Solis Aquatic Center exemplifies how park projects can be designed to meet the unique needs of their local community. This project is the result of a multi-year effort to use data to identify communities with significant and specific park needs. Spearheaded by LA County Supervisor Hilda Solis in partnership with residents and local stakeholders, the Hilda L. Solis Aquatic Center will be the first public swimming pool in West Puente Valley.

II. A DATA-DRIVEN PROJECT

Initially conceived and prioritized because of the 2016 Park Needs Assessment (PNA), this project is the result of extensive data analysis and community outreach. After initiating the PNA in March 2015, LA County Parks spent 16 months developing data-driven techniques to determine the type and location of park need in Los Angeles County.[4] This process culminated in a detailed profile for each of the County's 188 study areas. Each study area profile included an evaluation of community needs and identified future park investments.

Responding to community feedback and the high need for swimming pools in the West Puente Valley Study Area, LA County Parks prioritized building a new aquatic center facility in the community.[5] Upon completion, this project will be one of the most high-profile park developments in LA County that stemmed from the 2016 PNA.

III. BRINGING GOVERNMENT AND COMMUNITY TOGETHER

The Aquatic Center is the result of agency partnerships between LA County Parks, LA County Public Works, and Hacienda La Puente Unified School District. The school district owns the property, but the LA County Department of Public Works is leading the design and construction. The County also brought in Active SGV, a local nonprofit, to assist with community-based planning and outreach. Hacienda La Puente Unified School District is leasing the land to LA County Parks, which will operate and maintain the aquatic facility and surrounding park space.

A testament to the careful planning that went into this project, LA County Parks conducted significant outreach to ensure that the project catered to the unique needs of the community. They led numerous engagement events at different times of day and conducted focus groups with specific stakeholder groups such as students, seniors, and working adults.[6] Takeaways from these focus groups included the community's desire for outdoor exercise equipment, public murals, and a pollinator garden. LA County Parks also ensured that community members had access to project information throughout the lifespan of its development by creating a project website that enabled the community to learn about the project on their own time and stay informed over the years.[7]

IV. POOLING FROM SEVERAL SOURCES

Given the large scale of this project, the County relied on multiple local, state, and federal funding sources to plan and construct the project, such as:[8]

- $14.75 million from LA County Proposition A Excess Funds: This funding provides money for the purpose of developing facilities and open space for public recreation.
- $8.5 million from the State of California Department of Parks and Recreation under the Statewide Park Development and Community Revitalization Program: This grant program creates new parks and new recreation opportunities in underserved communities across California.
- $8.21 million from LA County Net County Costs
- $2 million from the San Gabriel and Lower Los Angeles Rivers and Mountains Conservancy (RMC) under the Regionwide Grant Program: RMC provides tens of millions of dollars for projects that preserve open space and habitat, increase access, and create healthy and climate-resilient communities.

» $1.5 million from the US Department of Housing and Urban Development Community Project Funding Grants: These grants provide funding for a variety of projects such as workforce training, parks, public facilities, and other critical infrastructure or services.

LA County Parks used several strategies to make their applications more competitive for these grant sources. For example, the inclusive and robust engagement techniques described in the previous section made LA County Parks more competitive for grant funding as strong engagement is a key metric for many park development grants. Community support was also crucial, as grantors often assess community support to determine whether a project is appropriate for funding.[9] With support from the local school district, Supervisor Solis, and many other community stakeholders, this project was very competitive for grant applications. Lastly, LA County Parks recognized that workforce development components would make their project more attractive on grant applications, so they highlighted in their grant applications that they would train lifeguards on-site once the aquatic center opens.[10] Future park development projects should incorporate these techniques to increase benefits to the community while simultaneously maximizing their competitiveness when applying for grant funding.

Credit: County of Los Angeles Department of Parks and Recreation, (LA County Parks)

V. ACHIEVEMENTS AND LESSONS LEARNED

Creating Partnerships

LA County Parks created strategic partnerships to improve this project's efficiency and scale. The planning and development of the Hilda L. Solis Aquatic Center presented significant capacity challenges due to the substantial scope of the project. By creating a team of agencies to partner on this project, LA County Parks was able to distribute responsibilities and increase their overall capacity. As a result, the project had adequate capacity to develop competitive grant applications, ultimately enabling the project to secure the necessary funding for planning and construction.

Leasing the Land

The Hilda L. Solis Aquatic Center highlights how interagency coordination can help agencies achieve mutually beneficial outcomes. Oftentimes, parks are unable to be built in high-need communities due to the lack of available vacant land, and Hacienda La Puente Unified School District is unable to build this type of facility due to its significant capital and maintenance costs.[11] By allowing LA County Parks to build the facility and then lease the land from Hacienda La Puente Unified School District, this park turned from an idea into a reality. As a result, LA County Parks and the school district will be able to use this facility for physical education and sports programming under a joint-use agreement.

Using a Data-driven Approach

The Aquatic Center is an excellent example of how LA County Parks leveraged data to build a park that met the unique needs of the West Puente Valley community. The 2016 PNA allowed LA County Parks to visualize where and what kind of parks are needed. Future park development in LA County should use this data-driven approach to first identify high-need communities, and then target investments that are most relevant to those communities. By doing this, agencies can work towards achieving the goal of equitable and accessible park and recreation space for all communities in LA County.

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SCHOOLYARD GREENING CASE STUDY

Green schoolyards are a key solution to creating equitable park space in Los Angeles County, where over half of residents do not have access to a park within walking distance of their homes.[1] Space is scarce in the County, but the Los Angeles Unified School District has over 1,000 campuses, all of which are publicly owned. Transforming schoolyards, where children already spend a significant portion of their day, into community green space can help close the park access gap. Green schoolyards can give children, regardless of what neighborhood they live in, access to not only a nice space to play but also a systems-based approach to mitigating pollution and climate change, boosting mental and physical health, improving educational outcomes, creating opportunities for social and emotional development, and strengthening local communities. These benefits are amplified when the schoolyards are open to the public outside of school hours through joint-use agreements between school districts and municipalities.[2]

This case study presents three distinct examples of green schoolyards in Los Angeles County: Jeff Seymour Family Center, Castellanos Elementary Living Schoolyard Project, and Walnut Nature Park. Jeff Seymour Family Center is a unique model where greening and social services amenities are co-located on a decommissioned school campus. Castellanos Elementary Living Schoolyard Project shows how large public landholders can influence park access regionally, highlighting the Trust for Public Land's 28x28 campaign. Lastly, Walnut Park demonstrates how a small community asset with a constricted footprint can be transformed to have multiple uses.

JEFF SEYMOUR FAMILY CENTER

I. FROM DECOMMISSIONED ELEMENTARY SCHOOL TO COMMUNITY HUB

True to its original use as an elementary school, Jeff Seymour Family Center (JSFC) serves as an important community hub. JSFC is in El Monte, a high park-need city in the San Gabriel Valley. It is located at a previously decommissioned elementary school that was revamped to provide social and health services as well as green spaces and urban forestry benefits to the surrounding community; every feature was thoughtfully designed around community wellness. This space unites the surrounding neighborhood and increases social connectedness, community mobilization, and access to support and services.

By co-locating social services with green space, JSFC provides social, recreational, environmental, and economic benefits in one site and serves as a crucial resource for El Monte families. Amenities and benefits offered include neighborhood beautification, opportunities for walking and biking, recreation, educational signage, community science educational opportunities, and hands-on learning in science, math, nutrition, and land stewardship.[3] The Family Center houses services including urban conservation corps youth development programming, dental and health clinics, college support programming, parenting workshops, preschool programs, special education elementary programs, curriculum for students from County probation programs, and more.

II. JSFC SERVES A HIGH-NEED COMMUNITY

The social services provided at JSFC are aimed towards community members with the highest need for supportive services, such as at-risk youth, students with disabilities, and immigrant and low-income families. It is in an underserved community with little green space, where about half of the population are immigrants.[4] According to the 2010 Census, the median household income was $39,535, with about 24% of the population living below the poverty line.[5]

III. A SCHOOL SUPERINTENDENT'S LEADERSHIP AND VISION

JSFC was born from the work and ideas of its namesake—Jeff Seymour—in partnership with members of the El Monte School District and nonprofit Amigos de los Rios. Seymour was an educator in the El Monte School District for much of his career and initiated the transformation of an empty elementary school into a community hub. Mulhall Elementary School, a part of the El Monte School District, was decommissioned in 2009 due to depopulation resulting from the housing crisis and economic issues. In the interim, El Monte School District continued to own and maintain the property but let various community groups borrow the space for projects and events.

Jeff Seymour already had a holistic approach to education and thought about schools as critical community hubs, particularly in areas with a significant population of immigrants. The philosophy of the El Monte School District is that schools are a trusted place that nurture the community's children. Therefore, schools are ideal places to extend services to families effectively.

Seymour envisioned co-locating social services and integrating nature at Mulhall Elementary. El Monte School District invited community organizations to use the elementary school as an office, and as diverse community members began using the space, it began to take shape as a hub where all could connect with services and collaborate with each other. With the transformation of the campus as a multi-use space, Seymour proposed incorporating nature to serve as a common thread to formalize, upgrade, and unify the campus. To renovate the outdoor space, El Monte School District partnered with Amigos de los Rios, a community-based, environmental justice nonprofit with long-standing and trusting relationships with the district and with a deep understanding of the social and environmental needs of the neighborhood.[6]

IV. PARTNERSHIPS TO MAXIMIZE COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT AND BENEFITS

The partnerships between El Monte School District, Amigos de los Rios, and the City of El Monte increased the impact of JSFC on the community. JSFC is owned and administered by the school district, making it a natural extension of the other schools in the community. Parents and families already trust the school district and its staff, making them more likely to utilize the space and services at JSFC. Partnerships with Amigos de los Rios and the City of El Monte provided unique but critical contributions to the JSFC that boosted its reach and benefits.

Partnerships to engage the community and volunteers

El Monte School District partnered with Amigos de los Rios to help engage community members and volunteers in the transformation of the outdoor campus due to their expertise in creating well-used, multi-benefit parks and connections with the San Gabriel Valley. Amigos de los Rios, utilized their strong relationships with volunteers and experience with volunteer training to engage community stakeholders in their work. For example, they leveraged volunteers from over 40 high schools and colleges who participated in their Emerald Necklace Stewardship program. Amigos de los Rios also encouraged other students who frequented the campus to participate in the renovation. Lastly, Amigos de los Rios led a community art project to transform the campus into a colorful, engaging and inviting space, which was a key factor that helped make JSFC more welcoming.[7]

Amigos de los Rios hosted volunteer events for community members to work with the Conservation Corps, specifically on the stormwater management infrastructure, which included bioswales and rain harvest areas. Some of these events were intentionally hosted in the rain so that Amigos de los Rios, the Conservation Corps, and volunteers could see in real-time their efforts to capture rainwater. Participants were encouraged to watch as water fell off the roof or collected in other areas, and then adjust the size or depth of the ditches accordingly. Community members learned how to read the landscape and developed a sense of agency in caring for and stewarding it. Participants learned first-hand the importance of capturing water and its relation to the regional watershed.

Partnerships to increase public access

Many schoolyard greening projects face issues of open access and the need for an operator to take on liability after school hours. The City of El Monte entered into a joint-use agreement with the School District to make the JSFC campus more accessible by taking on liability, which allowed for additional amenities and after-hours use. Amigos de los Rios also created a joint-use bike pump track in response to community requests. This partnership expanded the recreational and access benefits of the JSFC campus.

V. FUNDING

Funding for Jeff Seymour Family Center came from three main sources, including:[8]

- The California Greenhouse Gas Reduction Fund through the California Department of Forestry and Fire Protection, Urban and Community Forestry Program. This fund was intended to support projects that plant trees, reduce stormwater runoff, provide shade, lower energy consumption, improve air quality, and provide jobs.[9]
- The Environmental Enhancement and Mitigation Program through the California Department of Natural Resources. This program was intended to fund environmental enhancement and mitigation projects that are directly or indirectly related to transportation facilities.[10]
- Philanthropic funding from the REI Corporation.

Credit: Amigos de los Rios

OTHER GREEN SCHOOLYARD PROJECTS

I. CASTELLANOS ELEMENTARY LIVING SCHOOLYARD PROJECT

In the Pico-Union neighborhood of Los Angeles, a low-income community of color that is one of the most densely populated neighborhoods in the city, the Camino Nuevo Charter Academy's Jose A. Castellanos Elementary schoolyard renovation brought greenspace to hundreds of children. The project removed 1,500 square feet of asphalt and replaced it with 26 native trees, over 500 native shrubs, a new play structure, and a shaded outdoor classroom. The designers used as many natural materials as possible, including boulders, plants, and grass.

Trust for Public Land (TPL), a nonprofit dedicated to creating parks and protecting land, partnered with Los Angeles Unified School District and Camino Nuevo Charter Academy to transform the campus of Castellanos Elementary. The three partners worked collaboratively with students, parents, and teachers to create a student-led design for the schoolyard. TPL also spent several weeks teaching 4th-grade students about the environmental and sustainability benefits that could be incorporated into their visions for their school. This offered a unique opportunity for students to meaningfully shape and engage with the new green space.

The Castellanos Elementary project was the kickoff for TPL's 28x28 initiative, a project aiming to green 28 schoolyards in Los Angeles by the 2028 Olympic and Paralympic Games. TPL has raised over $36 million in public and private funding for this effort.[11]

Credit: Aaricka Washington/ LAist

II. WALNUT NATURE PARK

Walnut Nature Park is located at and shares amenities with Walnut Park Elementary School, located in the densely populated unincorporated community of Walnut Park. As a joint venture between the County of Los Angeles Department of Parks and Recreation (LA County Parks), County Supervisor Gloria Molina, and the Los Angeles Unified School District in 1998, the park is an early example of a joint-use green schoolyard in Los Angeles County. It provides the community with both organized activities and open recreation for youth and adults. Features include children's play areas, public restrooms, an amphitheater, picnic tables, and a softball field. On the weekends, the park is open to the public from dawn until dusk. On school days, the park is open to the public for just a few hours, from the time that school ends until dusk.[12] The overall goal of Walnut Park is to increase individuals' and families' involvement in their community in a location that many of them already frequent.[13]

Credit: County of Los Angeles Department of Parks and Recreation, (LA County Parks)

III. ACHIEVEMENTS AND LESSONS LEARNED

School facilities provide beneficial structure

Jeff Seymour Family Center offers lessons in co-locating more structured, educational space with green space. An educational institution, when combined with non-institutional or unconventional features, can create a safe community hub. Educational institutions can provide structure, which is beneficial for creating routine and predictability. These are major components of trust and comfort for visitors.

Other features of the JSFC were de-institutionalized, including the colors used and the layout of the outdoor campus. The partners on the project added bright colors and green infrastructure and chose to move the fence from the front of the building to create a pocket park for the general public to use, whether they were entering the campus or not. These features work in tandem with the more traditional elements of a school campus to create a holistic hub with which the neighborhood can engage.

Nonprofits are essential partners

JSFC demonstrates how nonprofits with knowledge of their communities can be essential to creating well-used and sustainable spaces. Amigos de los Rios had deep connections with the community in El Monte as well as the San Gabriel Valley broadly, which helped them conduct meaningful community engagement and design and implement infrastructure that is reflective of community input; the organization reports having "a pulse of the different mini, micro- constituencies" in the community. This was key to knowing which groups within the community would benefit the most from JSFC, as well as the organization's ability to engage volunteers to transform the campus. The nonprofit's relationships helped weave together a culture of care for the land and others in the community. This culture is what makes the space so well-loved and cared for.[14]

Joint use is necessary to fully realize the benefits of green schoolyards.

For green schoolyards to reach their maximum effectiveness, they must overcome the barrier of joint use or shared use. Joint use or shared use agreements allow schoolyards to be accessed by the wider community outside of school hours.[15] For some school administrators and districts, concerns about after-hours liability, funding, and maintenance will stop their green schoolyard projects from being truly open to the community. Instead, these projects will only benefit school-age children and the school's staff.

This case study shows three different examples of access agreements for the different school sites. Castellanos Elementary is a green schoolyard that provides numerous benefits to its students but does not allow access to the public. Walnut Nature Park is open to the public outside of school during daylight, with County Parks assuming operations and liability after hours. Meanwhile, Jeff Seymour Family Center's main campus is open to the public during daylight hours and its small pocket park is accessible at any time.

Joint use can transform green schoolyards into shared public parks, extending the benefits of projects such as JSFC, Castellanos, and Walnut Nature to an entire community. This is a common sense and cost-effective solution to the park equity gap, and there are various means of achieving it.[16] Local municipalities—such as the City of El Monte in the case of JSFC—can facilitate joint use agreements by assuming liability for the schoolyard after school hours. Alternatively, outside intermediaries can offer programmatic solutions to stand in for school districts of park operators. The Community School Parks program, run by the Los Angeles Neighborhood Land Trust, provides supervision and programming on LAUSD schoolyards after hours. Moving forward, schools, municipalities, and non-profits can all have a role in facilitating the transformation of schoolyards into public parks, and this would have a critical positive impact on park equity and climate resilience for millions of Angelenos.

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VISTA HERMOSA NATURAL PARK CASE STUDY

I. FROM CONTAMINATION TO RECREATION AND LEARNING

Vista Hermosa Natural Park (Vista Hermosa) demonstrates the necessity of transformation and remediation of hazardous sites located in urbanized areas of Los Angeles County. When Vista Hermosa opened in 2008, it was the first park to open in Downtown Los Angeles in over 100 years.[1] Its opening was touted as a major civil rights victory, with the park serving a historically low-income community of color and increasing the average park acreage by 13 percent for the 111,000 residents of the Westlake neighborhood.[2]

In a community in need of space for recreation, the development of this 9.5-acre park is made possible through the collaboration between government agencies to pivot the site from an abandoned school construction project and through ambitious site remediation. The park was a joint partnership between the City of Los Angeles, the Los Angeles Unified School District (LAUSD), the Mountains Recreation and Conservation Authority (MRCA), and the Santa Monica Mountains Conservancy (SMMC). LAUSD owns the land with MRCA leasing the space to provide park services. MRCA hosts educational programming at the park along with the "Transit to Trails" program which provides free bus service from the park to the Santa Monica Mountains.[3]

The park also offers unique recreational opportunities for nearby residents as well as sophisticated stormwater management and climate-resilient features. The park features walking trails, meadows, picnic grounds, a nature-themed playground, an amphitheater, and a FIFA-regulated soccer field. Climate resilient features include permeable surfaces for water capture, green roofs that retain rainwater and absorb carbon dioxide, and a water collection and irrigation cistern system.[4]

II. BALANCING COMPETING COMMUNITY NEEDS

While the area surrounding Vista Hermosa is today still considered a very high park need area, the need for a school on the site initially took precedence.[5] The current site of Vista Hermosa was the intended home for the Belmont Learning Center. The construction of this school was proposed to relieve overcrowding from other nearby LAUSD schools. Construction began in 1997, even though the State Division of Oil and Gas had raised alarms about the site's history as an abandoned oil field. By 1998, construction was halted due to the presence of methane and hydrogen sulfide gases and major fault lines beneath the site.[6]

Despite the clear presence of harmful gases and potentially dangerous fault lines, the need for a new school was still present. This need was debated by a citizens' commission appointed by LAUSD to weigh the present environmental risks and the ongoing pressure to relieve severe school overcrowding.[7] After consultation with the citizens' commission, LAUSD ultimately concluded that the major and minor fault lines beneath the site presented serious safety concerns, and no school construction should take place over fault lines. LAUSD demolished any construction over fault lines but maintained control of the school facilities constructed on the eastern part of the site. To address the presence of harmful hydrogen sulfide and methane gasses, thirty-six inches of topsoil was removed, and eighteen inches of sand and eighteen inches of topsoil was laid down to allow escaping gases to percolate horizontally.[8] While the original school project was not realized, this challenge presented a new opportunity to meet the community's need for a park and open space. With LAUSD leasing the land to MRCA, this opportunity became a reality.

III. CROSS-AGENCY PARTNERSHIPS

The collaboration between the City of Los Angeles, LAUSD, MRCA, and SMMC to establish a joint-powers agreement was a critical accomplishment, allowing Vista Hermosa to be funded, constructed, and operated in the long term. The park had a budget of $14 million, which was administered by MRCA. Funding sources included:[9]

- Proposition 12: The Safe Neighborhood Parks, Clean Water, Clean Air, and Coastal Bond Protection Act which funds projects that repair and improve the safety of state and neighborhood parks.[10]
- Proposition 50: The Water Security, Clean Drinking Water, Coastal and Beach Protection Act which funds projects that protect communities from drought, protect and improve water quality, and improve local water security by reducing dependence on imported water.[11]
- Proposition 84: The Safe Drinking Water, Water Quality and Supply, Flood Control, River and Coastal Protection Bond Act which funds projects that provide sustainable and livable communities through urban greening.[12]
- The United States Department of Housing and Urban Development Community Development Block Grant Program administered by The City of Los Angeles Community Development Department which funds projects that help develop viable urban communities by providing suitable living environments.[13]

- Proposition K: L.A. For Kids provides funds for the acquisition, improvement, construction, and maintenance of City parks and recreation facilities through an annual property tax.[14]
- Proposition A: The Los Angeles County Safe Neighborhood Parks Act provides funding for capital improvement projects under the Community-based Park Investment Program and Neighborhoods parks through a parcel tax.[15]
- Philanthropic funding from LA84 Foundation which awards grants focused on equality of access to youth sports and The Weingart Foundation which provides grants advancing racial, social and economic justice in Southern California.[16,17]

IV. PARK FEATURES REFLECT COMMUNITY INPUT

MRCA approached this project set in a densely urbanized region of Los Angeles with the spirit of bringing the benefits of mountains and open space to the city. To marry the two, MRCA held listening sessions where community members shared what park features they would like to see. The inclusion of a large lawn for sunbathing and picnicking and the intertwining walking paths throughout the park are both features in direct response to community wishes.[18]

The ongoing popularity and usership of the park are a testament to the community outreach efforts made during the planning stage. Vista Hermosa operates as a space of learning, recreation, and refuge for local communities. MRCA continues to oversee the educational programming at the site, providing education for an average of 1,485 visitors per year through programming and hosting 1,500 to 2,000 athletes per week on average. Programing includes school class programs, extracurricular after-school programs, and family and community programs.[19] While some of the programs have had to scale back since the COVID-19 pandemic and due to lost revenue from ceasing filming at the site, the ongoing benefit of the park endures.[20]

V. CLIMATE RESILIENT PARK FEATURES

The inclusion of climate-resilient features at the park site also points to the park designers' forward-thinking nature and consideration of community needs. The climate-resilient elements present at Vista Hermosa were cutting-edge at the time of the park's creation in 2008 and their benefits are still being realized today. The park features 2,576 square feet of green roofs on park buildings, drought-tolerant plantings, permeable surfaces, drip irrigation, and natural cistern basins to retain stormwater and irrigate plantings at the park.[21] These features help to capture 54 percent of water runoff at the park annually and retain 120 thousand gallons of water during storm

Credit: Mountains Recreation & Conservation Authority

events. The 600 to 700 trees planted on-site help to cool the park by almost one degree Fahrenheit and save 8.1 million gallons of water annually. The park reduces carbon emissions by 84 percent and sequesters 22.23 tons of carbon annually.[22]

The forward-thinking spirit of the park's design and careful consideration of community needs have helped Vista Hermosa remain a neighborhood asset. The success of this park can help serve as a model for other ambitious remediation projects in Los Angeles.

VI. ACHIEVEMENTS AND LESSONS LEARNED

Joint use agreements represent opportunity and challenges

While the partnership between the City of Los Angeles, LAUSD, SMMC, and MRCA resulted in a wonderful community asset, there have been challenges with the joint use agreement over time. LAUSD has recently banned filming within the park, posing revenue challenges to MRCA which used filming fees to help fund various park programs.[23]

Climate resilient technology challenges

There were challenges to being an early adopter of climate-resilient technologies. These challenges mean that not all climate features at the park are fully realized. For example, the green roofs present on building structures at the park require extra irrigation to keep the plants alive, which conflicts with the park's goal to minimize water use. The permeable concrete paving in the parking lot requires unanticipated vacuuming to remain functional.[24]

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WISHING TREE PARK CASE STUDY

I. A PARK BUILT FOR AND BY THE COMMUNITY

Located on a now-remediated superfund site in the unincorporated community of West Carson, Wishing Tree Park provides 8.5 acres of desperately needed green space to one of the most park-poor urban communities in LA County. Adjacent to a synthetic rubber manufacturing plant, the heavily polluted site posed significant environmental and health risks to the surrounding community. After years of advocacy and cleanup, Wishing Tree Park now serves a predominately working-class Latinx neighborhood that previously had zero acres of park space. The recently opened park includes a community building, a walking trail, and recreation areas like a basketball court, futsal soccer courts, and a baseball field. To benefit the climate and local ecosystem, the park provides carbon-sequestering native trees, drought-resistant landscaping, a pollinator garden, and a high-efficiency irrigation system.[1]

As a result of community organizing and partnerships, Wishing Tree Park is an excellent example of how a formerly contaminated site can be turned into a community asset. Brownfield and superfund sites are notoriously difficult to clean up and redevelop, and remediation of industrial waste requires extensive regulatory oversight, often demanding multiple rounds of assessment and cleanup. At the same time, remediation funding is limited, and most grant funds require the applicant to be the site owner. Despite these challenges, the Del Amo Action Committee (DAAC), a community-based organization created to promote better environmental and health conditions in the community, led a decades-long campaign to restore the site. After years of determination and support from partners such as the Los Angeles Neighborhood Land Trust (LANLT) and LA County Department of Parks and Recreation (LA County Parks), the community celebrated the opening of Wishing Tree Park in 2024.

II. PROJECT BENEFITS

This park provides environmental and health benefits to a historically underserved neighborhood. Before the creation of this park, the unincorporated community of West Carson had no park or open areas.[2] This park now provides needed space for residents to exercise, play, and gather. The new park provides direct environmental benefits; for example, the new landscaping captures carbon dioxide from the air, and the stormwater-capture elements improve and increase our local water supply. There are indirect environmental benefits as well, as community residents will no longer need to drive up to two miles to access the nearest park, thereby reducing greenhouse gas emissions by decreasing vehicle miles traveled (VMT).

III. FROM A BURDEN TO AN ASSET

Wishing Tree Park serves a community burdened by decades of environmental injustice. From 1943 to 1972, the site area was part of a much larger, 280-acre industrial operation producing synthetic rubber. The United States Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) placed the Del Amo site on its National Priorities List in 1997 after finding contaminated soil and groundwater on the site.[3] Contamination in the area included benzene, tetrachloroethene, and trichloroethene, pollutants that pose significant threats to the local ecosystem and neighboring community. The effects of these pollutants were apparent to the community—before remediation, residents reported experiencing headaches, bloody noses, rashes, and other health issues.

Credit: County of Los Angeles Department of Parks and Recreation, (LA County Parks)

It took nearly thirty years and many setbacks for the community's vision of this park to become a reality. Community members began to organize for testing and cleanup in 1990 after finding repeated cases of contamination in the soil, groundwater, and inside homes.[4] Starting in 1995, DAAC began advocating for Montrose, Shell, Dow Chemical, and the US EPA to buy all the homes of 60 families along 204th Street, ultimately leading to the demolition of 27 homes in 2001 to create a buffer between the contaminated site and the community.[5]

Following this success, DAAC then redirected its focus to turn the now-empty lot into an asset for the community. After significant advocacy from DAAC, the EPA mandated a $55 million cleanup of the site funded by Shell Oil and Dow Chemical, the responsible parties.[6] In 2002, the EPA and the Department of Toxic Substances Control (DTSC) identified the site as a "no further action" site, but DAAC sampled the soil for heavy metals and found lead, chromium, arsenic, aluminum, and nickel, chemicals that are known to cause nausea, rashes, headaches, and many other health issues.[7]

In 2010, DAAC convened a 204th Street Park Stakeholder Meeting, forming a task force to develop partnerships to achieve the long-standing goal of having a safe, community-supported park in the Del Amo community.[8] Over the next five years, the community worked to fundraise and eventually construct a water-permeable barrier that separated the contaminated soil from a new layer of clean soil. In 2015, LANLT purchased the property for $1 from Shell Oil. After LANLT secured sufficient funding, Wishing Tree Park began construction in late 2018; approximately five years later, on May 16, 2024, DAAC, LANLT, and LA County Parks held a ribbon-cutting ceremony for the opening of this hard-fought park.

IV. FUNDING

Remediated land converted into park projects are some of the hardest parks to fund and implement, highlighting the need for partnerships and significant fundraising capacity. The Wishing Tree Park project, for example, required multiple funding sources to construct the $16.35 million dollar park:[9]

- $4 million from California State Parks: Funded through Prop 68, this program funds projects that improve parks, including creating new parks, improving safety, and adding recreational amenities.
- $4 million from Shell Oil.
- $2.5 million from the California Natural Resources Agency: This funding comes from the Urban Greening Program, which funds the establishment, enhancement, and expansion of community spaces and parks, tree planting, green infrastructure in streets and alleys, and the construction of active transportation infrastructure.
- $1.69 million from LA County Quimby: The Quimby Act in Los Angeles County requires developers to dedicate land for parks and recreation when they subdivide land. The Quimby Act also allows developers to pay fees instead of dedicating land.
- $1.1 million from the Coastal Conservancy: These grants fund a wide variety of projects to increase the availability of beaches, parks, and trails for the public.
- $812,362 from LA County Measure A: The Los Angeles County Safe, Clean Neighborhood Parks and Beaches Measure provides funding for park development throughout LA County.
- $750,000 from the Rivers and Mountains Conservancy: RMC provides tens of millions of dollars for projects that preserve open space and habitat, increase access, and create healthy and climate-resilient communities.
- $500,000 from Assemblyman Al Muratsuchi.

V. ACHIEVEMENTS AND LESSONS LEARNED

Communication with Partners and the Community

Wishing Tree Park highlights the significant challenges associated with redeveloping a contaminated site, but it also provides insight into how future projects can learn from this model. A key challenge for brownfield and superfund redevelopment is that remediation is heavily regulated throughout assessment and cleanup, often resulting in a long and arduous planning process. Project partners from Wishing Tree Park noted that they often had to fight to be included in this process, leading to frustration within the community and inefficiencies throughout redevelopment.[10] Future remediation projects should prioritize frequent and meaningful communication between regulatory agencies and the community to promote transparency and accountability. This can be a symbiotic relationship—frequent communication between agencies and stakeholders can build trust with the community, and it can also allow the community to serve as a local resource for the project lead (i.e. helping to identify future barriers or constraints).

Leaning into Community Advocacy

Wishing Tree Park underscores the invaluable benefit of developing a strong partnership with the community throughout project development. Project partners noted, for example, that DAAC played a crucial role in the engagement process, advising on the best ways to engage with the community and even conducting some of the engagement themselves.[11] LANLT was able to quickly develop trust and prioritize neighborhood needs due to DAAC's deep ties to and understanding of the community.

This project may never have materialized if not for the community's tireless advocacy. Decades before the ribbon-cutting ceremony, neighbors affected by the contaminated site started DAAC to create a safer and healthier community for themselves and their families. DAAC served as a strong advocate for the contaminated site and actively fought for the buyout of homes closest to the contamination, advocated for increased cleanup measures, and pressured local, state, and federal agencies to expedite the project's timeline. The completion of this park is a testament to the dedication and perseverance of DAAC, their supportive partners, and the community they worked with.

Reusing the Land

Much of urban LA County lacks access to crucial park space, leaving millions of residents without access to nearby outdoor recreation. What little open land is left is, like Wishing Tree Park several years ago, polluted and unsafe for human activity. While much of this land has been reserved for business and industry in the past, Wishing Tree Park proves that this land can be reclaimed for people.

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