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A New Class of Greenways for L.A.

A river rarely stands alone. This is even true for the highly urbanized and controlled Los Angeles River. Retrofitted in the 20th century as a massive storm drain, the L.A. River is fed by multiple tributaries, forming a web that (when viewed on a map) resembles the region's famous freeways. Many of these secondary channels were similarly concretized, siloing neighborhoods and destroying habitats in an effort to control urban flooding. Building on years of advocacy, this past fall Los Angeles County officials created a new land-use designation, hoping to spur projects that re-naturalize sections of the L.A. River and other local waterways.

One such waterway that could benefit from the new designation is the Pacoima Wash, a 33-mile tributary in the San Fernando Valley. "In Pacoima, it divided the community, literally," says Roxy Rivas, a local community organizer, about the channelization. In 2012, Pacoima Beautiful and Studio-MLA had developed a greenway vision plan that resulted in improved bike paths but failed to gain further traction. Five years later, after a tragic drowning during a storm, the idea for a greenway came into focus again.

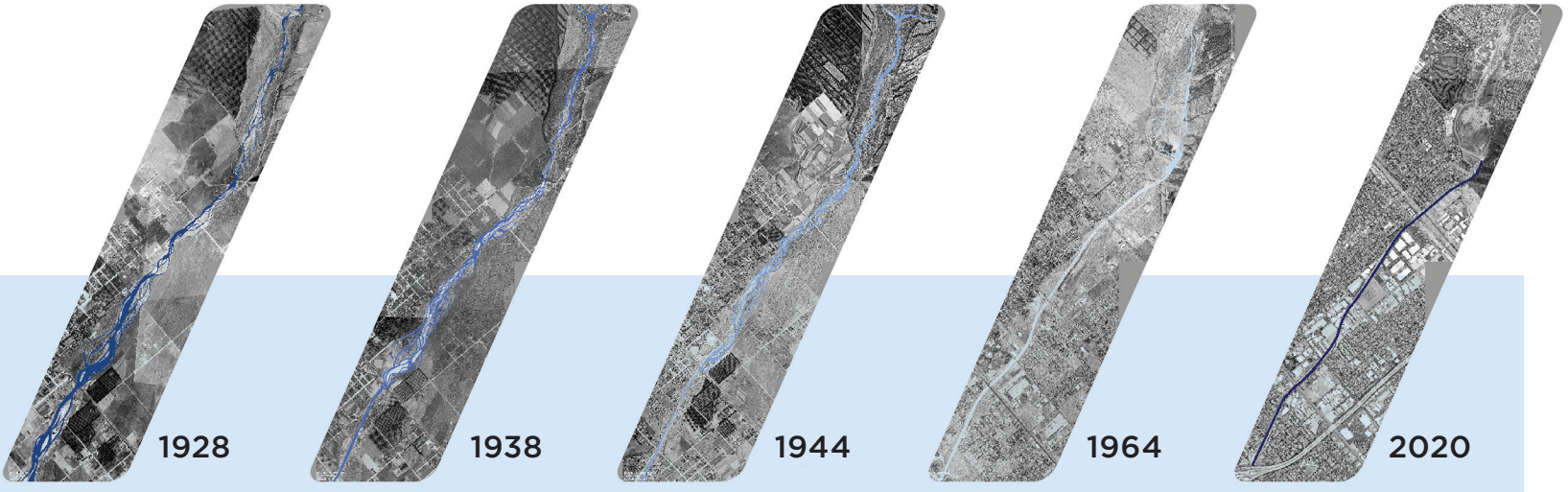
Although there is a government framework in place to manage flood control sites as public infrastructure, it has been less clear which entity should take the lead when maintaining them as green space, says Robin Mark, ASLA, the director of partnerships at SALT Landscape Architects, which Pacoima Beautiful hired in 2024 to complete a



ABOVE
Stretching for 33 miles through the San Fernando Valley, the Pacoima Wash meets another tributary that ultimately intersects the L.A. River.

SALT LANDSCAPE ARCHITECTS

The course of the Pacoima Wash before and after channelization



ABOVE
Just like the L.A. River, smaller waterways in Southern California underwent infrastructure changes in the 20th century to control flooding.

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feasibility study for a four-mile greenway along the wash. "The Flood Control District is responsible for making sure our communities don't flood. But when we change the use of these waterways into something that's recreational, nobody has authority to manage that," she says.

In September, the county's board of supervisors addressed these impediments by creating an "urban natureways" park typology for greenways and proposed recreational sites that reimagines flood channel infrastructure as multiuse green spaces. It designates the county's Department of Parks and Recreation as the lead agency for implementing park projects at these sites and for managing the converted greenways. The initiative also adds four sites where projects are pending, including Pacoima Wash, to the county's regional trail network and directs officials to seek outside funding to complete the greenway plans.

Michelle O'Connor, who oversees trails planning for the county's Department of Parks and Recreation, says linear waterways that traverse multiple jurisdictions can make it difficult to determine which government entity should partner with a community group championing a park project. "We can now come in and work with local community group organizations as the government counterpart."

Supporters hope the designation will create momentum for progress and financial support. "Everything in government requires many steps to get to an end goal," Mark says. "This is one very significant step forward to getting us to a place where L.A. County Parks has the authority to manage these concretized waterways."

—JOE ADLER

SALT LANDSCAPE ARCHITECTS, GOOGLE MAPS