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(213) 978-1300

**CITY OF LOS ANGELES
CALIFORNIA**



ERIC GARCETTI
MAYOR

EXECUTIVE OFFICES
200 N. SPRING STREET, ROOM 525
LOS ANGELES, CA 90012-4801

MICHAEL J. LOGRANDE
DIRECTOR
(213) 978-1271

LISA M. WEBBER, AICP
DEPUTY DIRECTOR
(213) 978-1274

JAN ZATORSKI
DEPUTY DIRECTOR
(213) 978-1273

FAX: (213) 978-1275

INFORMATION
<http://planning.lacity.org>

May 14, 2015

Los Angeles City Council
c/o City Clerk's Office
Attn: Arts, Parks, Health, Aging and River Committee
Room 395, City Hall
Los Angeles, CA 90012

Dear Honorable Members:

Northeast Los Angeles Riverfront District: Council File: 14-0602

In response to Council File NO. 14-0602, the Department of City Planning (Department) is pleased to provide this report regarding the feasibility of officially recognizing the NELA RC study area as the NELA Riverfront District and, developing a Specific Plan for the NELA Riverfront District.

Establish NELA Riverfront District

The Northeast Los Angeles Riverfront District Vision Plan and Economic Development Implementation Strategy (Vision Plan) was completed in May 2014 after a yearlong collaborative community engagement and planning process. In response to the multiple community stakeholders that participated in the process, the Vision Plan identified eight goals that balanced the values of equitable community and economic development:

1. Enhance a sense of place;
2. Enliven the riverfront open-space experience;
3. Connect neighborhoods and River via enhanced mobility;
4. Improve ecological health of the built environment;
5. Strengthen and support employment opportunities;
6. Improve governmental regulation and coordination of the River;
7. Make space for social equity; and
8. Promote sustainable economic development.

These eight goals along with the recommendations that were identified under each goal lay out a detailed strategy for implementing the Vision Plan. The implementation requires an on-going collaborative effort that will rely on the collective commitment and engagement of public, private and non-profit organizations. A key component of the strategy relies upon the designation of the NELA study area as the NELA Riverfront District.

Fortunately, as a result of the extensive participation process and level of engagement that took place during the development of the Vision Plan, the notion and extent of the NELA Riverfront District (District) has already been introduced as a brand. The implementation of any number of other next steps provides additional opportunity to leverage and expand awareness of the NELA Riverfront District concept. Based upon the success of this initial branding, there does not appear to any further actions needed on the part of the City at this time. The public, private and non-profit organizations committed to implementing the District should be encouraged to continue to use the District name and identify opportunities to further highlight the area as the NELA Riverfront District whether hosting events, writing grants and/or undertaking any other NELA-related activity.

A formally-adopted District would only be required at such time in the future that there is the desire or intention, as part of a community plan update for example, to embed particular design standards or zoning features to specific parcels within the District. Until such time continuing to describe and highlight the District as a brand should be sufficient for the purposes of writing grants, obtaining funds, installing wayfinding and overall describing the area.

Specific Plan for the NELA Riverfront District

While the motion directed the Department to develop a specific plan for the Northeast Los Angeles (NELA) area, the Department respectfully suggests an alternative strategy that it feels would prove equally effective, would take the same amount (or less) time and could be incorporated as part of the Department's current work program and therefore would not require additional funding or staff.

The Department understands that the desire for a specific plan stems from growing interest in rezoning and developing design standards for many of the parcels within the NELA area that are in proximity to the Los Angeles River to ensure that future development is consistent with the goals and vision of the Los Angeles River Revitalization Master Plan (LARRMP), the NELA Vision Document and the community. In particular, the community is interested in preserving the low-density character of the river area, protecting the area from the often negative ramifications of gentrification (displacement of current residents and businesses) while also encouraging strategies that maintain and incentivize affordable housing, promote non-vehicular (active transportation) access to the river, and attract community-serving uses.

While specific plans have proven to be an effective planning tool they do require considerable staff and funding resources and can take many years to develop and adopt. The most recent specific plans, the Warner Center and Cornfield Arroyo Seco Specific Plan, each took seven years from inception to adoption. Part of the time and cost of a specific plan is attributable to the environmental analysis that is required by the California Environmental Quality Act (CEQA). This analysis usually contributes (at best) one to three years of a project's timeline and can add hundreds of thousands of dollars to the project's cost.

Alternative Strategies

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With the communities' objectives in mind, coupled with concerns about the cost and time associated with developing a specific plan, the Department proposes the following alternative strategies that would achieve the same goals in a similar or lesser timeframe and without requiring an additional work plan.

- 1) Revise existing Q conditions for existing industrially-zoned parcels within the Frogtown area of Elysian Valley by the end of Fall 2015. These Q conditions would primarily limit projects within the industrial parcels to a 1:1 FAR and a height of 30.' These limitations would essentially encourage the adaptive re-use of existing structures while limiting the development of new construction.
- 2) Embed River Context Design Standards as part of the *re:code* effort that is currently underway and is expected to be completed within three years by 2018. These new Standards would include lot coverage, setback, FAR and height limitations for varying site conditions (railroad tracks or not) and use types. In addition, the standards would include river-friendly façade treatments that would require (depending upon varying site conditions) river-facing entrance (front door), transparent facades, protection/enhancement of river views and active uses. An incentive program would also most likely be embedded into the *re:code*. The program would allow projects to obtain additional FAR or height in exchange for a variety of public benefits including public access through the site to the river, affordable housing and/or public open space.
- 3) Leverage the new *re:code* to update community plans and align the parcels within a community plan with the new zones and design standards established by the *re:code*. The community plan update program is intended to launch towards the completion of the *re:code* in FY 2018/19. Community plans that are experiencing growth and/or gentrification pressures would be prioritized first. Communities along the stretch of the Los Angeles River between the Verdugo Wash and the Arroyo Seco would arguably be likely candidates for the first or second round of community plan updates. The portions of the Los Angeles River south of the Arroyo Seco are either included in the recently adopted Cornfield Arroyo Seco Specific Plan or the Boyle Heights and Central City North community plans that are currently in development and expected to be adopted concurrent to the completion of the *re:code*.

The Department appreciates the opportunity to outline this alternative strategy and looks forward to an on-going discussion to resolve any concerns and address any questions the Council may have.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Michael J. LoGrande". To the right of the signature, there is a small handwritten note that says "for MJC".

Michael J. LoGrande
Director of Planning