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## Press Release

# Long Beach City Staff Report on Feasibility of Acquiring Open Space Along the L.A. River is a Sham and a Cover Up

LONG BEACH, CA, April 8, 2021

Yesterday the City of Long Beach released a [‘feasibility study’](#) for the acquisition of open space along the Los Angeles River purportedly for parks, nature preserves, and restored wetlands. This study was requested by the City Council, agendized by Councilman Al Austin, very clearly in response to the public pressure campaign mounted by the Riverpark Coalition. With over a thousand petition signatures and growing community support, we have raised public awareness surrounding a development project at 3701 Pacific Place, for a self-storage facility and RV storage lot, which would strip the residents of their last opportunity to see a major new open space development along the river, in line with 25 years of river revitalization planning.

We very much hoped for a legitimate study, and thanked Councilman Austin for this proposal at the time, though we feared the worst—that the City would use this study as a disingenuous brief to defend its own betrayal of the community up to this point (having already greenlit initial stages of commercial development).

Sadly, our worst fears have been realized. This ‘feasibility study’ is in fact an *in*feasibility study: It is nothing more than a dishonest attempt to rewrite history. It is a retroactive rationalization and justification of decisions already made by callous, arrogant City Planning staff during the past two years, totally in contravention of the 2007/2015 [Long Beach RiverLink Plan](#), the 2015 [Lower LA River Revitalization Plan](#), and the [1996](#) and current [2020 Los Angeles River Master Plans](#). **It specifically takes the crown jewels of river revitalization, the large, 405 Freeway-adjointing tracts 3701 Pacific Place and 712 Baker Street, off the table and hands them over to private developers.**

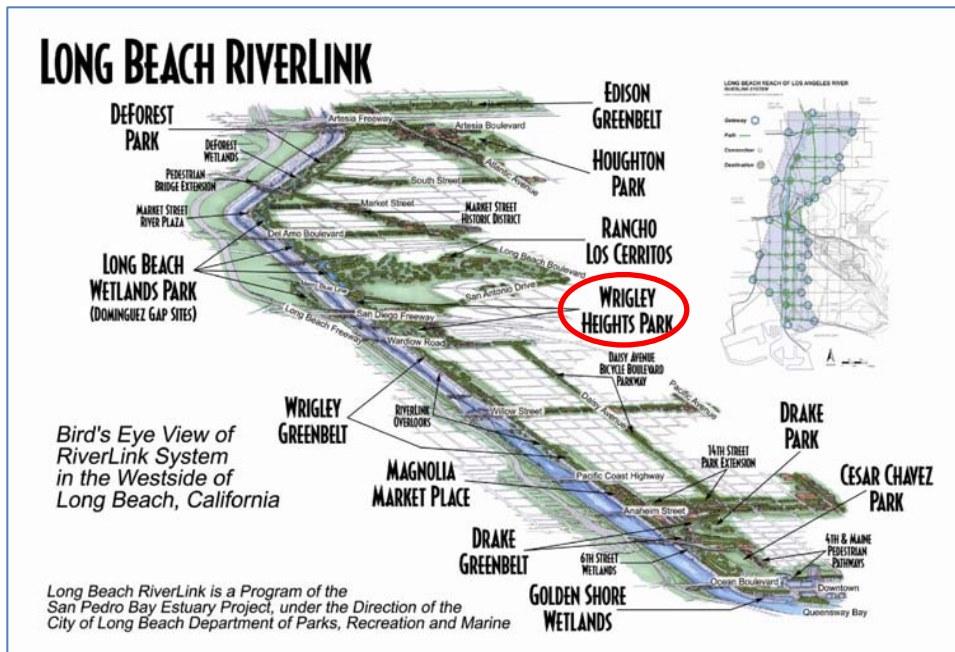
The bottom line is that the City plans to see that these crown jewels of future riverine park space, promised to the park-poor, disadvantaged residents of the western half of the city, *will be developed* and lost forever. River revitalization planning of two and a half decades *and* the residents *be damned*: The Long Beach section of the L.A. River *will be further industrialized*.

**For Immediate Release**

The dream that one day park equity would be taken on in a serious manner—that we would begin to rebalance the scales between 17 acres per thousand residents of park space on the Eastside to just 1 acre per thousand in West and North Long Beach—that dream, if the City Council accepts this dishonest report, is dead.

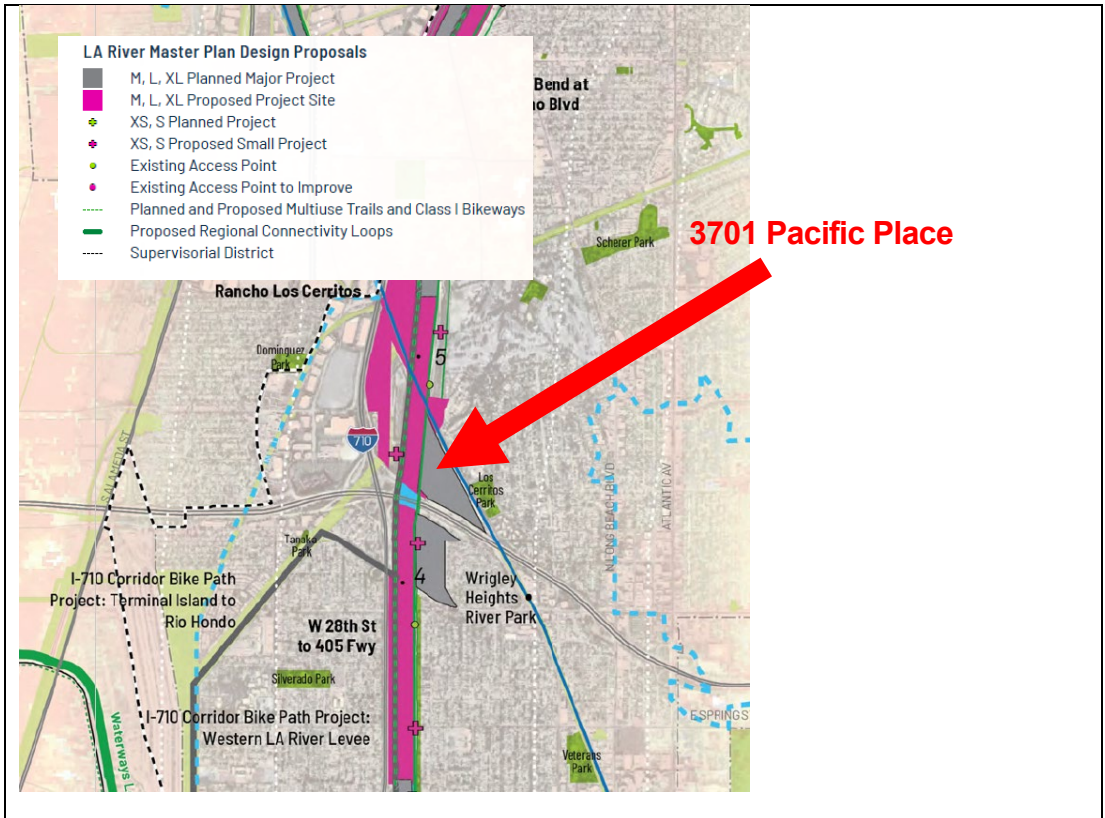
Long Beach City Hall was the executioner when it greenlit the initial development process in 2019 and 2020 and now it is the undertaker. As our recent op-eds in the [Press-Telegram](#), [Signal Tribune](#), and [Beachcomber](#) have made clear, park space is one of the [key equity issues in Long Beach](#). With this report, City Hall has abandoned equity and environmental justice.

For many years, river revitalization proposals have identified 3701 Pacific Place (the former golf driving range) and the adjacent major parcel to the south of the 405 Freeway (the former Oil Operators Inc. site at 712 Baker Street) as the future Wrigley Heights Park North and Wrigley Heights Park South, respectively (or just the Wrigley Heights Park or, in more recent plans, the Wrigley Heights River Park). These would form a large, regional parkland and would serve as the anchors of a revitalized and re-naturalized greenbelt, connecting other parks along almost the entirety of the river in our city.

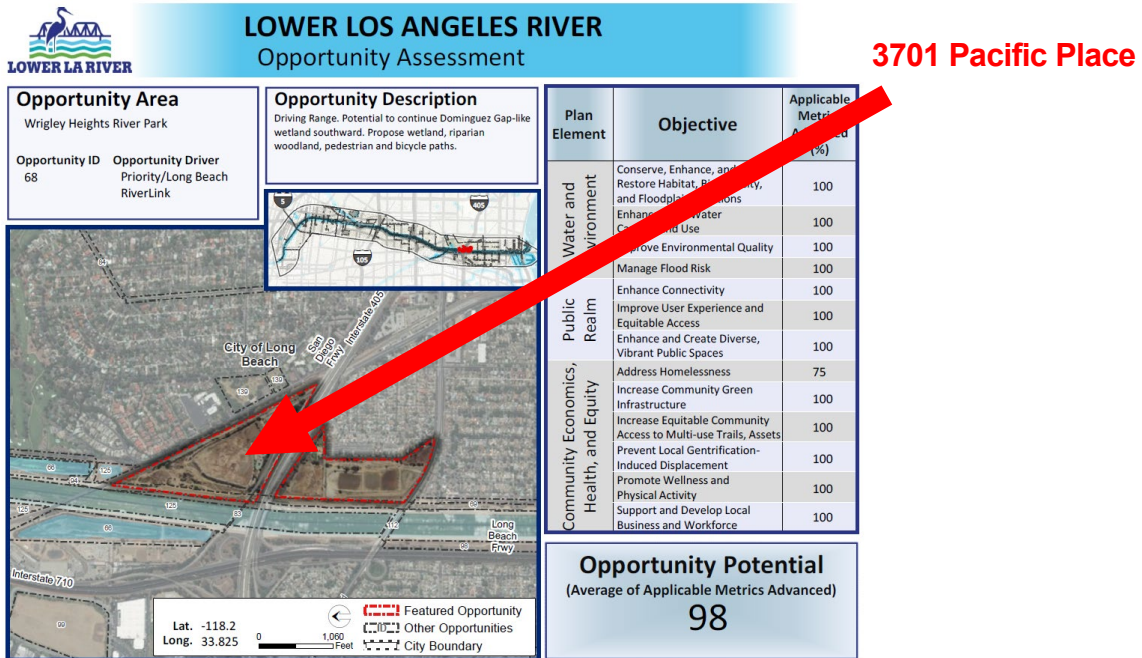


The 2020 LA River Master Plan, currently out in draft form for public comment, identifies two types of parcels along the river: "proposed" projects and longstanding "planned major" projects. In the case of both 3701 Pacific Place and 712 Baker Street this designation is "planned major project" in light of the longstanding commitment to this land for future open space.

2020 LA River Master Plan:



2015 Lower L.A. River Revitalization Plan:



Yet, instead of identifying the ample sources of grant funding available to acquire, remediate, and add accessible park space and nature preserves to these properties, the City's 'feasibility study' is in fact nothing short of a defense brief against the City's own culpability in selling out the residents and delivering this land into the hands of developers for commercial exploitation.

### **The Big Lie**

After months of activism and community organizing by Riverpark Coalition, City management had to make a decision: either accept responsibility for having made a mistake, the greenlighting of commercial development of land long planned for river revitalization, effectively giving up on that multi-decade effort, without a single community hearing or outreach session, or cover it up.

The choice they made is no surprise, given the pattern we have become used to as residents. They chose to cover it up. To do so, they needed a scapegoat, and so a scapegoat they found.

This entire 'feasibility study' essentially boils down to two sentences on p. 17 of the report:

"2017: The City engaged TPL [Trust for Public Land] again to connect with the private property owners for 712 Baker and 3701 N. Pacific Place and attempt to identify an amount the owners would entertain for the sale of these properties. After 10 months of repeated attempted communication with the property owners with no returned communication, TPL concluded that the property owners were not willing sellers and the City was not able to begin any discussions with the property owners that would result in acquisition."

This statement is categorically false. The Trust for Public Land is a non-profit organization which helps facilitate the acquisition and development of parks and open space. It is not the responsible party for the action or inaction of a municipality failing to serve its residents.

More to the point, we have been in close communication with TPL and it is our understanding that the characterization of TPL's role is wholly inaccurate as a factual matter. The reality is that they very much have an active plan for the acquisition of these properties and they have chronically failed to *receive* the cooperation of the City, despite repeated outreach. They were in fact *never* engaged by the City as its official representative to negotiate for purchasing the land either in 2017 or at any other time. But they have made clear to us, they are extremely motivated and eager to become involved.

It is frankly shocking and very disheartening that City staff would stoop so low as to throw a noble organization like the Trust for Public Land under the bus, so to speak, to cover up their own failure to serve the community and the fact that they are captured by outside development interests.

Furthermore, the City's claim that there is no willing seller of 3701 Pacific Place is blatantly dishonest and misleading. The current owner, an LLC which acquired the property for the purpose of InSite's

development, bought it from Pender Properties Inc. in Nov. 2019 for \$6 million. Pender had just purchased the property one week earlier from Sukkut Development Inc. for \$4 million (making a cool \$2 million, 50% profit in just 8 days).

The City never even made a bid. There were two willing sellers in a row, and the City never took an interest or entered into negotiation. Instead, after receiving an application for development in Feb. 2020, it did everything possible to accommodate and fast track the developer.

That developer is InSite, whose principal for this project is Paul Brown. Paul Brown has made it clear in at least one community meeting that InSite would be willing to sell at the right price. He stated that to activist and Riverpark Coalition board member Ann Cantrell. We do not know what 'the right price' is for one reason: InSite has never been approached by the City, except to facilitate its commercial development and further despoil the Los Angeles River.

What is more, there is a significant vacant parcel beside 3701 Pacific Place, all part of the same tract envisioned as the future park, which is owned by the McDonald Family Trust. Jeanne McDonald has been trying to sell this land for years, to no avail. Facts like these are why this report is nothing short of the Big Lie when it comes to the issue of LA River open space.

And yet other aspects of the 'feasibility study' also demonstrate that it was assembled as a defense brief rather than with a robust commitment to the truth.

For example, p. 12 of the report shows a 2010 'Green Vision Map' which identifies the very properties this report seeks to eliminate from consideration, 3701 Pacific Place and 712 Baker Street, as future wetland project open space. It also shows the former Will Reid Boy Scout Camp (another parcel long ID'd in river revitalization planning) as a park project—that site is now home to a controversial housing tract. The report claims that this map "created the framework for exploration and drove momentum for park acquisition and development". Of course, if that was the case, we would not be where we are now. In fact, in retrospect this is a map of significant lost opportunities and betrayal of the river-adjacent working class, mostly minority, western Long Beach communities.

With regard to the claim that 3701 Pacific Place—despite being seen as ideal for park development by river planning experts for decades, and having formerly served as private open space in the form of a golf driving range—is unsuitable because it is inaccessible, that too is a lie. To argue that because it has one access road at its southern end for vehicles means that the site must then become an "auto-oriented property" is logic impossible to comprehend. The reality is that the site can be accessed by bicycle and pedestrians from four different directions, and greater access could be added. [Here](#) is a map of some potential points of access.

By directly lying, this so-called 'feasibility study' reveals itself as nothing more than a political weapon, a weapon against the activism of residents to save their river for parks and open space. It repeats the false claim that "it is unlikely that the current property owners are willing sellers" (p. 27), despite the fact that no negotiation was ever undertaken, no ground has been broken (except on soil testing), and no City Council

decision has yet been made on whether an EIR (environmental impact report) should be required for for 3701 Pacific Place or if it should be rezoned to 'commercial storage'.

Another important issue unaddressed is trailing liability. Before the current series of owners of 3701 Pacific Place, it was for many years owned by the same petroleum consortium as 712 Baker Street still is, Oil Operators Inc. (OOI). OOI may have trailing liability for any lasting effects due to the industrial operations which fouled the soil, now capped over. The City of Long Beach, as an oil operator, is a member and co-owner of the OOI consortium. Should the City block a full EIR being conducted, it could be argued in court that indeed the City is illicitly attempting to cover up its own trailing liability for this site.

For all the foregoing reasons, this report should not be taken seriously. The only conclusion sought was *infeasibility*, in order to deflect blame for the further despoliation of the river through unfettered concrete commercial paving over and construction.

### **The Truth**

The truth is that park equity is about values and priorities. If there is a will, there is a way, and in this case it would require just a modicum of will. As Riverpark Coalition's own feasibility study ([available here](#)), as well as our conversations with the Rivers and Mountains Conservancy, the Trust for Public Land, and other experts on park space acquisition and development have shown, the money is there.

In fact, when we met with the Deputy City Manager in charge of preparing this report, Kevin Jackson, he admitted it out loud. When we told him about our research, he readily acknowledged that the lack of grant funding is simply not the problem: The money is there.

And the potential to remediate the land for park space is there, too. In fact, it is cheaper and easier to remediate for park space because the method which would be used for any development, capping and containment, lends itself to open space. It allows for the escape of trapped methane more easily (as is the case with Davenport Park), rather than the build up that occurs inside of buildings, and there are no massive million-pound structures pressing down on soil which does not have the strength and consistency solidly to resist and remain static. In the case of the InSite project, they plan to build a massive concrete self-storage facility directly over an over fifty-year-old storm drain pipe which likely would not be able to withstand the pressure and would cause deeply buried chemicals in the soil to leach into the Los Angeles River. Furthermore, there could be a similar issue due to proximity to two 83-year-old abandoned oil wells and two active pipelines.

The problem is not the money, the problem is City Hall, which loves developers and disregards the residents on a routine basis. We have been told by everyone we have met with, outside of Long Beach, that the problem was Long Beach. Our City simply has refused to engage on the issue of river revitalization and park equity.

We call on the Long Beach City Council, and Councilman Al Austin in particular, who has embraced this report, not to go down in history as failures for their disadvantaged western Long Beach communities.

Heed the words of Mayor Garcia himself, when [in 2016 he wrote](#):

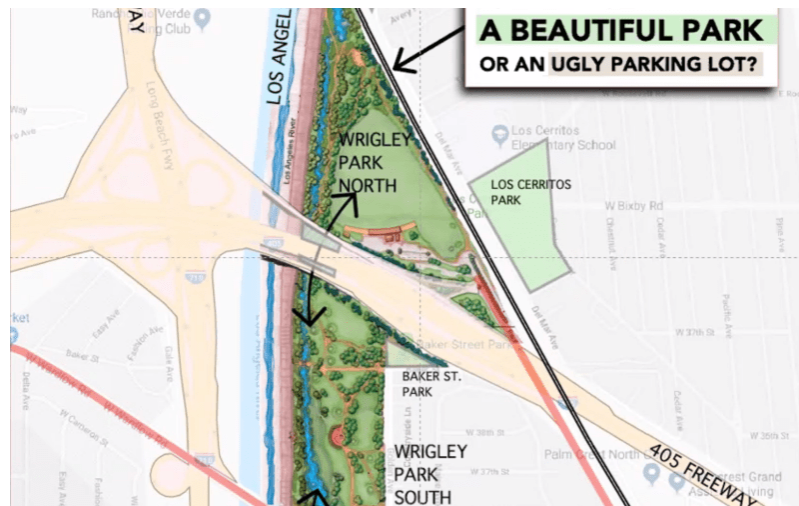
“The Los Angeles River flows through many disadvantaged communities, where residents are disproportionately impacted by poor air quality from local heavy industry and congested transportation corridors and suffer from a severe lack of access to recreational opportunities and outdoor space.” He encouraged utilization of the river as “a unique opportunity for open space development, urban greening, and...a relatively untapped recreational resource for the region.”

The alternatives offered in the report are a farce, and would only make sense as additions to the greenbelt that should be anchored by 3701 Pacific Place and 712 Baker Street.

Frankly, we strongly believe that these so-called alternatives will never actually be developed into open space or even acquired and are intended as a meaningless attempt to ameliorate the community as we watch the major vacant parcel, long promised as a park, being built up with concrete and lost forever.

The County-owned strip adjacent to 3701 Pacific Place, for example, would be a critical component of a large regional park. However, as an alternative to that park, it would merely serve as a “front yard” for the RV storage lot and self-storage facility and an enhancement to the value of the private development at public expense.

This report must be rejected, and the City Council must refuse the request to rezone and commercially develop 3701 Pacific Place when this report is presented and a hearing is held on Tuesday, April 13<sup>th</sup>.



Riverpark Coalition press release archive: [See here](#).

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