

**THE HERITAGE PARKSCAPE IN THE HEART OF LOS ANGELES**  
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**The City Project, Center for Law in the Public Interest**  
**Policy Brief**



Los Angeles is park poor, with fewer acres of parks per resident than any major city in the country. All communities suffer from the lack of parks and recreation, but low-income people of color suffer first and worst. The urban park movement is greening Los Angeles, inspired by a collective vision: **a comprehensive and coherent web of parks, playgrounds, forests, schools, beaches, and transportation that serves the diverse needs of diverse users and reflects the cultural urban landscape.** Parks are important in themselves, but there is even more at stake. People are coming together to create the kind of community where they want to live and raise children.

In 1930, Frederick Law Olmsted's firm presented a plan for parks, playgrounds, and beaches that would have made Los Angeles one of the most beautiful and livable regions in the world.<sup>2</sup> Civic leaders demonstrated a tragic lack of judgment when they ignored the Olmsted Report. The urban park movement today is restoring a part of the Olmsted vision and the lost beauty of Los Angeles. Indeed, CLIPI is publishing a digital version of the Olmsted Report to guide activists and public officials.

Chavez Ravine exemplifies the struggle. Chavez Ravine was a bucolic Latino community through the 1950s. The Olmsted Report recommended regional athletic fields there. The City of Los Angeles instead forcibly evicted the residents with promises of affordable housing. The city razed the community and destroyed their way of life, then broke its promises to the people and sold the land to the Dodgers. The Dodgers drowned Chavez Ravine in a sea of asphalt to build Dodger Stadium and a parking lot for 50,000 cars with not a single place for children to play.<sup>3</sup>

Today Los Angeles has less than one acre of park per thousand residents. There are also vast disparities in access to parks and recreation. In the inner city there are 0.3 acres of parks per thousand residents, compared to 1.7 acres in white and wealthy parts of Los Angeles.<sup>4</sup> The national standard is six to ten acres.

A recent statewide survey on Californians and the environment showed that 64% of Californians (72% of Latinos) say that poorer communities have less than their fair share of well-maintained parks and recreational facilities. A majority (58%) agree that lower-income and minority neighborhoods have more than their fair share of toxic waste and polluting facilities compared to wealthier neighborhoods.<sup>5</sup>

The lack of parks in communities of color in Los Angeles is not an accident of unplanned growth, but the result of a history and pattern of discriminatory land use



**The Digital Olmsted Vision**

- 70,000 acres of parks
- 214 miles parkways
- Diverse parks for diverse users
- Schools for community use
- 18 mile L.A. River Parkway
- Doubling public beaches
- Public transit
- Regional park authority



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<sup>2</sup> Olmsted Brothers & Bartholomew and Associates, Parks, Playgrounds and Beaches for the Los Angeles Region (1930) (the Olmsted Report).

<sup>3</sup> Culture Clash, Chavez Ravine (2003); Don Normark, Chavez Ravine, 1949 at 18-21 (1999).

<sup>4</sup> Jocelyn Stewart, Officials Resort to Creativity to Meet Need for Parks, L.A. Times, June 15, 1998 (1990 census data).

<sup>5</sup> Mark Baldasare, Public Policy Institute of California, Statewide Survey: Special Survey on Californians and the Environment vi (June 2002).

planning, racially restrictive housing covenants, federal mortgage subsidies limited to racially homogenous neighborhoods, and discriminatory funding formulas.<sup>6</sup>

**That's the bad news. Here's the good news.** California's Proposition 40, the largest natural resource bond in U.S. history with \$2.6 billion for parks, clean air, and clean water, passed in March 2002 with an unprecedented level of support from low-income communities and communities of color. Support from voters with an annual family income below \$20,000 and with a high school diploma or less was the highest among any income or education levels.<sup>7</sup> **Prop 40 demolished the myth that a healthy environment is a luxury that communities of color and low-income communities cannot afford or are not willing to pay for.** We helped lead the Yes on 40 campaign, with direct mail in Spanish and English, get out the vote drives in targeted Latino communities, African American ministers supporting Prop 40 from the pulpit, and Cardinal Roger Mahony endorsing Prop 40.

One of the broadest and most diverse alliances ever behind any issue in Los Angeles joined together to create parks in underserved communities. We stopped warehouses to create the state park in the 32-acre **Cornfield**.<sup>8</sup> The Los Angeles Times called the Cornfield "a heroic monument, and maybe even a symbol of hope."<sup>9</sup> We stopped a commercial project to create a 40 acre park as part of a planned 103-acre park in **Taylor Yard** along the 51 mile **Los Angeles River Parkway**. We helped stop a power plant and a city dump in favor of a two square mile park in the **Baldwin Hills**, the historic heart of African-American Los Angeles, that will be the largest urban park in the U.S. in over a century -- bigger than Central Park or Golden Gate Park.

**The Heritage Parkscape.** We are working to unite the rich cultural, historical, recreational, and environmental resources in the heart of Los Angeles through a Heritage Parkscape—like the Freedom Trail in Boston—that will link Taylor Yard, the Cornfield, the Los Angeles River Parkway, the Zanja Madre or "mother trench" that provided water for early L.A., El Pueblo Historic Park and Olvera Street, old and new Chinatown, Little Tokyo, Elysian Park, Chavez Ravine, Confluence Park, the Arroyo Seco parkway, Debs Park, and Bidy Mason park, along with 100 other sites. Public art projects including murals, photo exhibits and installations on the ground and on the web, school art projects, oral histories, and theater will be part of this living legacy. Public transit will take children and their families and friends from the Heritage Parkscape to the beach, forests, mountains, and other wilderness and recreation areas. The people in the area are disproportionately low-income people of color, and an astonishing 29% of households have no car. We need to bring green space to the people, and take people to the green space.

The Heritage Parkscape will serve as a "family album" to commemorate the struggles, hopes and triumphs of the settlers and later immigrants who entered Los Angeles through this area. The Heritage Parkscape illustrates the power of place: "the power of ordinary urban landscapes to nurture citizens' public memory, to encompass shared time in the form of shared territory . . . . And even bitter experiences and fights communities have lost need to be remembered -- so as not to diminish their importance."<sup>10</sup>

<sup>6</sup> The Federal Housing Administration Manual of 1938 states: "If a neighborhood is to retain stability, it is necessary that properties shall continue to be occupied by the same racial classes. A change in social or racial occupancy generally contributes to instability and a decline in values." See also Mike Davis, *City of Quartz* 160-64 (1990); Mike Davis, "How Eden Lost Its Garden," chapter in Allen J. Scott and Edward W. Soja, *The City* (2000).

<sup>7</sup> L.A. Times state wide exit poll, March 7, 2002.

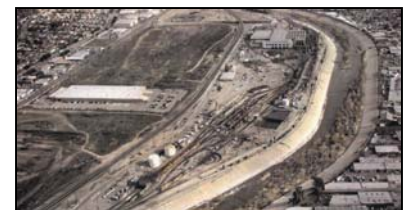
<sup>8</sup> Jesus Sanchez, L.A.'s Cornfield Row: How Activists Prevailed, L.A. Times, Apr. 17, 2001; Robert Garcia, *The Legacy of Rodney King and a Testament of Hope*, 8 Am. Bar Ass'n Goal IX 6 (2002).

<sup>9</sup> James Ricci, *A Park With No Name (Yet) but Plenty of History*, L.A. Times Magazine, July 15, 2001.

<sup>10</sup> Dolores Hayden, *The Power of Place: Urban Landscapes as Public History* 9-10 (1995).



<b>Support for Proposition 40</b>	
\$2.6 billion for parks, clean water, and clean air – Mar 2002	
Black voters:	77%
Latino voters:	74%
Asian voters:	60%
N/H White voters:	56%
Household Income < \$20,000:	75%
High school diploma or less education:	61%



The birthplace of El Pueblo de Los Angeles lies near the Native American Tongva village of Yangna, a site marked by a center divider on the Hollywood Freeway. The first settlers were Spaniards, Catholic missionaries, Native Americans, and Blacks. Mexicans and Californios further established the city before statehood. Chinese began arriving in 1850 in search of gold and worked on the railroad and in domestic jobs. The site of the Chinatown massacre of 1871, which first brought Los Angeles to international attention, is now a traffic light. Mexican-Americans, including U.S. citizens, were deported from the Cornfield during the depression. The city forcibly evicted the residents and razed Old Chinatown to build Union Station in the 1930s. Japanese in Little Tokyo were forced into concentration camps during World War II. Biddy Mason, a former slave freed in the 1850s, became a major landowner downtown and a founder of First AME, a major Black church in Los Angeles. Blacks in the twentieth century were forced into South Central by discriminatory land use policies. Italian and French immigrants, some of whom planted vineyards that graced the area, assimilated into the broader culture. The Heritage Parkscape revives the forgotten history of Los Angeles.<sup>11</sup> The footprint of the Heritage Parkscape coincides closely with the Olmsted vision for downtown.

**The values at stake. The beauty of the earth, the glory of the sky, the serenity of the river, the joy of the people, and the future of our children** bring communities together. Parks are not a luxury. People in parks play, walk, talk, kiss, sit, jog, bike, learn, protest, pray, or work. Parks are a democratic commons that provide a different rhythm for everyday life and bring people together as equals. Parks cool the city and clean the air and ground. Sports improve human health and academic performance; increase access to higher education; inspire players and fans; provide lessons in teamwork, leadership, and self-esteem; and provide an alternative to gangs, crimes, drugs, violence, and teen sex. Nearly 40% of California children are not physically fit and more than 25% are overweight, facing diseases including diabetes, blindness and amputations.<sup>12</sup> Sports are among the most valued cultural resources in many communities. New Latino immigrants do not organize politically, they first organize soccer leagues. Sports help desegregate society. Jackie Robinson broke baseball’s color barrier seven years before *Brown v. Board of Education* declared “separate but equal” unconstitutional. Parks promote economic vitality and create quality jobs. Simple justice requires equal access to parks and recreation for all.<sup>13</sup>

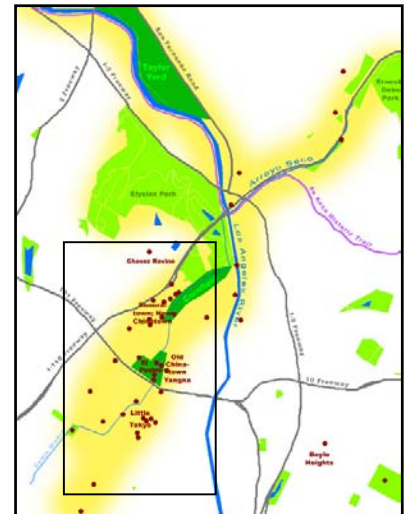
**Healthy schools, healthy parks, healthy communities.** Los Angeles is building schools and playgrounds for the first time in 30 years. The Los Angeles Unified School District is investing over \$8 billion for school construction, modernization, and repair. LAUSD has 800 schools, with 2,021 acres of school yards. 120 new schools will add 240 acres of open space Through the School Bond Oversight Committee, we advocate joint use of schools, playgrounds, parks, and common areas to make optimal use of scarce land and public resources. An anticipated \$45 to \$55 billion will be available statewide with joint use incentives. Schools are an educational reform, human health, and sustainable regional planning issue.

**Equal Access to the Beach.** The 1,100 mile California coast belongs to all the people. Malibu and media mogul David Geffen nevertheless have filed suit to cut off public access. Malibu is 89% white and 25% of the households have incomes of \$200,000 or more per year. Locked gates and barbed wire keep people off the beach,

<sup>11</sup> Robert Garcia et al., *The People of El Pueblo and the Cornfield: A Community History of Struggle, Hope and Triumph* (forthcoming 2003).

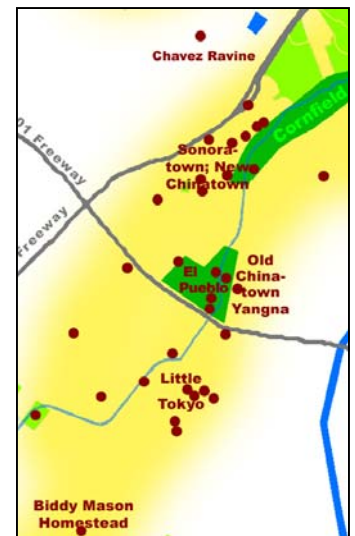
<sup>12</sup> Charles Ornstein and Erika Hayasaki, *26% of Kids Overweight, Study Finds*, L.A. Times, Dec. 12, 2002; Editorial, *The Youth Obesity Epidemic*, N.Y. Times, Nov. 29, 2002.

<sup>13</sup> Robert Garcia et al., *Dreams of Fields: Soccer, Community and Equal Justice* 13-19 (CLIFI 2002).



**The People of the Cornfield (5 mile radius)**

	Cornfield	LA City
Latino:	68%	47%
Asian:	14%	10%
N/H White:	11%	30%
Black:	4%	11%
Other:	2%	3%
Income:	\$28,908	\$36,687
Poverty:	30%	22%
No Car:	29%	17%



**Schools, Playgrounds and Parks**

- 90% children of color
- 120 new schools with 240 acres school yards
- 2021 existing acres open space
- \$8 billion local bonds
- \$45-55 billion in state and local bonds with joint use incentives

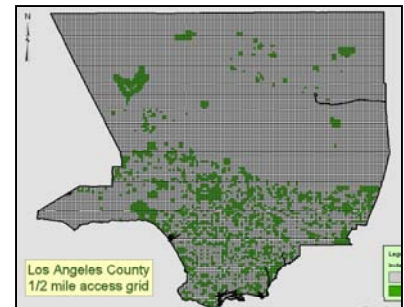
like “Blacks Prohibited” signs did in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Manhattan Beach forcibly evicted the black residents around Bruce’s Beach, the only black beach resort in Los Angeles. We influenced the California Coastal Commission to adopt a plan requiring Malibu to maximize access to the beach while ensuring the fair treatment of people of all cultures, races and incomes, the first time an agency has implemented the legal definition of environmental justice. This sets a precedent for other communities and government agencies.<sup>14</sup>

**The Green Access Index.** We are developing a “Green Access Index” to measure access to parks, working with UCLA Professor Leo Estrada and Eric Lomeli. This innovative GIS statistical measure will allow comparisons of communities throughout the country, like the dissimilarity index for residential segregation or the affordability index for housing.

**Strategies from the urban park movement.** (1) We are guided by a vision: a web of parks, playgrounds, schools, beaches and transit that serves diverse users and reflects the cultural urban landscape. (2) Coalition building and public education. We find out what people want and help them find collective ways of getting it. We emphasize the different values at stake—racial and economic justice, human health, environmental quality, democratic participation, informed decision making—to build support among diverse stakeholders. (3) Policy and legal advocacy outside the courts focuses on the political, planning and administrative processes. (4) Strategic media campaigns sharpen public debate and help build alliances. (5) Multidisciplinary research and analysis provide hard data to support reform. We connect the financial, historical and demographic dots to understand how the region came to be the way it is, and how it could be better. We follow the money to understand who benefits from the investment of public resources, and who gets left behind. We analyze the distribution of the benefits and burdens of public works based on race, ethnicity, income, and other salient factors. (6) We creatively engage opponents to find common ground. Impact litigation is a last resort only if necessary within a broader strategic campaign. (7) We alter the relations of power. We are winning real improvements in people’s lives, and giving people a sense of their own power. People who have not participated in government before are coming together to fight city hall and wealthy developers—and winning. We are building community and diversifying democracy from the ground up.<sup>15</sup>

Four of the central lessons of the environmental justice movement are that communities of color and low income communities disproportionately suffer from environmental degradation, are denied the benefits of public benefits including parks, lack the information necessary to understand the impact of environmental policies on all communities, and are denied full and fair public participation in the decision making process. We are learning from these lessons to bring children the simple joys of playing in the park and school yard.

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*Guatemalan Nobel Peace Laureate Rigoberta Menchú joins attorney Robert García and Anahuak Youth Soccer Association seeking parks and ball fields.*

<sup>14</sup> Robert Garcia et al., Equal Access to California’s Beaches (CLIPi 2002).

<sup>15</sup> Robert Garcia et al., Building Community and Diversifying Democracy: Strategies from the Urban Park Movement, chapter in Robert Bullard, Environmental Justice (forthcoming 2003); Robert Garcia, Mean Streets, Forum for Applied Research and Public Policy 75 (2000) Forum.ra.utk.edu/Archives/PDF/Forum15-3E.pdf.