



LOS ANGELES RIVER  
State Park  
Partners

January 14, 2023

Mr. Cory Zelmer  
Deputy Executive Officer  
Los Angeles County Metropolitan Transportation Authority  
One Gateway Plaza Mail Shop 99-22-6  
Los Angeles, CA 90012  
*and via email: LAART@metro.net*

cc: Armando Quintero, Director, California State Parks  
California State Parks Commission

Re: Los Angeles Aerial Rapid Transit Project DEIR

Dear Mr. Zelmer,

I write to express our deep concerns with the proposed Los Angeles Aerial Rapid Transit Project (LA ART). I represent the Los Angeles River State Park Partners (LARSPP), the nonprofit support organization (and State Parks Cooperating Association) for the three state parks along the Los Angeles River - Los Angeles State Historic Park, Río de Los Angeles State Park, and the Bowtie Parcel. These three urban state parks serve historically underserved, park-poor communities and represent an intentional investment by the taxpayers of the State of California to re-dress historic inequities and preserve key historic elements of Los Angeles.

As Executive Director of LARSPP, I have extensive on-the-ground experience with the day-to-day operations of these three parks, as well as knowledge of their creation, development, and ongoing needs. Our focus is on the considerable impacts of this project to Los Angeles State Historic Park (LASHP), a publicly funded green space that residents fought for decades to establish. The proposed gondola tramway route would cross one end of the 32-acre park with cables carrying gondola cars just 26 feet overhead, and a station building with a 98-foot-tall tower. The project would require the taking of park land for the footprint of the station, replacing 81 mature trees with hardscape, and would permanently alter the carefully designed vistas of the park, key features identified in the park's 2005 General Plan.



Despite these major impacts, the DEIR states that *"The proposed Project would not result in any significant and unavoidable operational impacts,"* and concludes that *"no mitigation measures required"* (ES 10 p. 29 and ES 12 p. 31). We strongly disagree with this conclusion.

This unsubstantiated finding is further complicated by the fact that the DEIR does identify as a "Significant Impact" the conflict with the LASHP General Plan. The DEIR describes as a "mitigation measure" the need to: "Obtain a Los Angeles State Historic Park General Plan Amendment (page 58, DEIR Executive Summary, Land Use and Planning element, LUP-2). The project asserts that "Pursuant to Public Resources Code 5002.2, the proposed Project shall obtain an amendment to the Los Angeles State Historic Park General Plan to allow transit uses within the Los Angeles State Historic Park General Plan." The current general plan for this park does not allow for transit uses within the state park because it is a **park**, a vital public green space in a historically underserved community. Putting a transit use within the park was never envisioned during the park development process and it will significantly impact the park user experience. Yet the DEIR simply claims that as long as the general plan document is amended to allow for transit, that mitigates the impact. *In no way does an amendment in a document mitigate the on-the-ground impacts of an aerial highway through a park, or the project's usurpation of public property.*

This notion that the impacts to the park will disappear with a General Plan amendment is absurd on its face. Amending the General Plan of a State Park to make way for a private transit station represents a terrible precedent. Beyond these fundamental objections, we identify the following specific areas where the DEIR analysis has either been insufficient or where impacts are incorrectly dismissed as not significant.

#### 1. Use of Park Land

The DEIR describes the Chinatown/State Park station location in section 2.5.1.3. It notes that the southern portion of the station would be on a City of Los Angeles ROW, while the northern portion of the station *would be integrated into the southern boundary of the Los Angeles State Historic Park*. This statement is highly misleading. Integration into a boundary implies something welcome and beneficial. This, rather, is a very tall, obtrusive building encroaching on state park land. Our **public** park has only 32 acres and cannot afford to lose acreage to a **private** project that benefits a private owner and individuals choosing to attend private events at a private stadium. The DEIR states that the station would take 2,195 square feet of state park property and an additional 9,320 square feet over the park from the station canopy. This would transform the park's entrance from one that feels pastoral and peaceful to a shaded, dense, built space. It shrinks the size of the park and takes parkland away from a community who fought hard to create it.



On pages 2-61, the DEIR also outlines various approvals the applicant would need to obtain from the CA Department of Parks and Recreation (DPR). It notes the need for a lease or an easement to allow for the construction and operation of the project.

We wish to point out that the application could not obtain an easement because easements are governed by PRC 5003.5 and require the department to specify conditions to allow *minimum* alteration to the physical features of the park and *minimum* interference with the use of the park by the public (emphasis added). Taking parkland permanently for a large station is a substantial alteration of the physical features of the park. This station would interfere with the uses of the park currently enjoyed by the public who paid for its creation. Furthermore, PRC 5012 restricts easements to public agencies for public purposes. The gondola is a *private* project.

We further note that this project could not proceed using a lease from DPR. The PRC 5003.17 specifies that the department may lease any parcel only if the director finds that the use would be compatible with the use of the real property as a unit or part of a unit, and with the sound management and conservation of resources within the unit. A new private gondola station is not compatible with the uses of the park, and is certainly not in furtherance of sound management and conservation of the resources of LASHP.

## 2. Tree Removal

The DEIR states the project for the Chinatown/State Park Station would require the removal of 30 trees, and the aerial rights across the park would remove an additional 51 trees. The DEIR states that in place of the lost trees would be hardscape and replacement trees elsewhere in the park. Mitigating the loss of mature trees, particularly protected native trees, with new trees is insufficient; mature trees have established complex and interconnected ecologies not easily replicated, and they sequester much more carbon than do young trees.

The DEIR also does not indicate where the replacement trees would be sited, and does not provide sufficient information to demonstrate that the alternative locations of new trees would maintain the current park experience and ecosystems. The park was thoughtfully designed by landscape architects with specific outcomes in mind to accommodate a variety of human and wildlife activities. The park is a careful balance of open space and tree canopy that allows for flexible uses, including special events such as music festivals. The landscape plan was developed based on an extensive public planning and visioning process, and further refined to accommodate large-scale special events.

It is not possible to simply plant 81 trees on the remaining property without potentially altering the use patterns of the park. In addition, the ratio of tree replacement should not be a 1:1 ratio, but rather, a mitigation ratio such as 5:1. In



the case of native cottonwoods, for example, mature trees are not available for purchase, so it could be a matter of planting 5 immature trees for every mature tree removed (at 6-7 years old, the park trees would be considered mature). Replacement at this rate in other areas of the park may not be feasible as it would reduce the amount of overall open space and diminish the capacity for flexible use. Thus the public ends up losing open space in the rest of the park with this proposed mitigation scheme.

Trees also require proper space and maintenance, especially in the early years. This project is setting back a decade of tree growth, and shifting the burden of maintaining new trees on to the DPR staff. There is no guarantee that the same level of carbon sequestration could be replicated (we believe it would not), thus negating the 'zero emission' claim currently used by LA ART. The destruction of 81 mature trees is not "insignificant" as the DEIR claims.

### 3. Impact on Historic Resources: the Zanja Madre and Roundhouse

The Zanja Madre, or "mother ditch," is the original water conveyance pipeline that brought water from the LA River to El Pueblo de Los Angeles. During excavations in the late 1990's, Metro unearthed a portion of the original brick pipeline on the site that is now the park. This was one of the key factors of historic significance that led the State Park Commission to classify this new park as a State Historic Park. This exposed section of the Zanja Madre near the Metro track is currently a major historical attraction of the park, the views of which would be significantly impacted by the overhead gondola route.

There has also been a long standing interest in looking for other elements of the original Zanja Madre in El Pueblo Historic Monument. This archeology has not yet been conducted. It is possible that the construction of the proposed Alameda Station could unearth and damage this resource, yet the EIR is silent on the potential of this finding.

As an organization committed to preserving the history of Los Angeles as embedded in the elements of LASHP, we would also like to note that the Alameda Station would significantly alter the historic and cultural setting of El Pueblo Historic Monument, particularly Olvera Street. It is important to remember that as recently as 2015, the American Planning Association named Olvera Street as one of the 15 Great Places in America. El Pueblo is listed on the National Register of Historic Places. These designations look at both the buildings and setting. The DEIR dismisses the impacts of its large Alameda station on this historic resource without confirming that the project would not jeopardize these national designations. El Pueblo is also an essential stop along two national historic trails: the Juan Bautista de Anza National Historic Trail and the Old Spanish National Historic Trail.

Another key historic element of LA State Historic Park is its history as the Southern terminus of the Transcontinental Railroad and home of Southern Pacific Railroad's



River Station, built in 1875. Often referred to as "LA's Ellis Island, the Station was where many 19th- and early 20th-newcomers first arrived to the city. The original roundhouse footings have been carefully excavated and this sensitive area is protected by department staff whenever staged events are considered (this point will be further discussed in section 6).

#### 4. Impact on Viewsheds

The park's 2005 General Plan identifies and emphasizes the view of downtown LA from this park, "... the Park site is a large open space that is in stark contrast to the dramatic skyline of downtown Los Angeles. Sometimes referred to as the "front porch" of the City, there are no other sites that capture this welcoming view of downtown Los Angeles (p. 38). The park design was created to optimize the opportunities for visitors to experience this view - a major park element accessible from most vantage points.

The station and gondola lines with their constant movement will degrade that viewshed, blocking the view from some vantage points. The DEIR images are inadequate to fully capture the impact of the station on the view of downtown from numerous places in the park. Putting a large-scale station at the end of the park will affect the park experience from multiple vantage points, especially from the bridge. What is currently a spectacular vista will now be marred by a new large building that encroaches on state park land, with constant movement emanating out of that building. This is a fundamental change in the park experience and is inconsistent with the original vision outlined in the General Plan.

We are also concerned that views of Elysian Park and the Historic Broadway Viaduct will also be severely impacted from certain vantage points within the park.

#### 5. Impact on Park Users

One of the key elements that came out of the numerous public meetings during the park's design was the desire for quiet and tranquility. This gondola's continuous movement a mere 26 feet overhead will fundamentally alter the sense of peace and quiet in the park, a rare place of respite in a very dense, park-poor area of Downtown LA. The DEIR illustrations are highly misleading and show gondola cars, cables, and towers from a far distance, not from the vantage point of being directly overhead park users. The renderings are purposely not to scale and fail to demonstrate how the project would impact an individual sitting on a knoll right under the gondola line.

The DEIR dismisses the importance of open space to provide a respite from urban life when it states "Los Angeles State Historic Park is in a highly urbanized area north of downtown Los Angeles. Recreationalists that may reside in the area are assumed to be accustomed to the urban edge of the park, of which the proposed Project would become a part." (p. 74). In other words, LA ART claims it is acceptable



to eliminate a portion of a public park simply because urban residents who live in an urban area are used to urban edges.

The entire point of the considerable investment of state taxpayer dollars to acquire and develop LASHP was to create an anecdote to urban life, bringing a major open green space, with all the associated health and wellness benefits, to those who had no such amenity. The DEIR is highly misleading to suggest that taking scarce park land and 81 mature trees, replacing them with hardscape, bathrooms and a new concessions building, and running an aerial highway across the park with gondola cars passing every 30 seconds is somehow making the project a "part of the park." It is, in fact, destroying the park's southern end, not enhancing it or providing contributing elements.

State Parks, LARSPP, and one of our key community partners, Clockshop, stage an annual Kite Festival at LASHP. Kite flying is an identified use in the park's General Plan, and the park's design ensured kites would have adequate space. The Kite Festival has grown year over year and now attracts thousands of visitors. The south lawn is an important part of this event and the gondola would preclude that use, thus moving more people into a smaller space. This represents an additional project impact that the DEIR dismisses as insignificant.

The DEIR asserts that the project is consistent with a goal of the Cornfield Arroyo Seco Specific Plan (CASP) to increase access to open space. It claims that the gondola would provide greater access to the park. However, the existing Metro L (Gold) Line already provides convenient public transit access to the park. We would argue that eliminating open space through the taking of park land is not consistent with increasing access to open space, especially when this "increase" is merely duplicative of an already existing transit service.

## 6. Impact on Park Operations & Revenue

The proposed project alignment cuts across areas that are frequently used as concert venues, a carefully planned designated use in the park's planning process. These evening concerts are an essential part of the financial viability of the park and provide necessary revenues that directly fund ongoing park maintenance and preservation, habitat creation, and a rich array of free community programs - from arts and culture events, school programs, and our new Farmers' Market, to food distributions for seniors and wellness classes of all kinds. Since concert events restrict the public's use of the park, State Parks limits the number of large events so as to maximize revenues while minimizing park access restrictions.

During the design phase of LASHP, the staff of State Parks met with concert promoters, cultural resource experts, and natural resource specialists. This process resulted in the identification of two preferred concert areas that minimize noise, protect the cultural resources such as the roundhouse, and protect wildlife, especially birds that are now populating the wetland portion of the park's north end.



The main stage is on the main lawn in the middle of the park, and the second stage is *directly underneath the proposed flyway of the gondola*, rendering it unusable in the future.

Every major concert that books an event at LASHP currently uses *both stages*. Eliminating the southern stage would cause promoters to seek other venues and result in lost revenues. As noted in section 3 of this letter, the roundhouse is a significant archeological site. The second stage therefore cannot be relocated to the roundhouse area, contrary to the claims of the DEIR in Figure 5-3. This graphic suggests that the second stage could be moved directly OVER the roundhouse area. The department has never allowed a large stage with loud music to be placed over the round house. The vibrations from the music could potentially damage the excavated archeological site that lies below ground level here. The second stage cannot be moved closer to the northern part of the park either because that would disturb wildlife that has taken up residence as the park's native habitat matures.

Thus, the gondola path effectively eliminates the second stage, thereby reducing the size of events and hence would reduce revenues. State Parks could not maintain the revenue stream by substituting more frequent, smaller events without having a major impact on park users. Every event requires partial closure so increasing the frequency to make up for the loss of the major events is not compatible with a public park. These indirect impacts of the gondola cables over the southern part of the park are not disclosed in the DEIR and represent a significant impact to the operations and financial viability of the park, as well as the ability of the state to staff and maintain the park.

We are also concerned that the parking lot at the park will fill up during game days with people heading up to Dodger Stadium, thereby restricting access to those who wish to visit the park. The DEIR identifies numerous parking opportunities in the Chinatown area, including the State Park. Given that the park's lot will be the most convenient for gondola riders, we would expect our lot to fill first.

#### 7. Meaningless Offer of 'New' Facilities

The addition of a concession building and a restroom as noted in Section 2.5.1.3 does not improve the park. There already exists a viable concession at the park, Cargo cafe, which would be negatively impacted by this project. The bathrooms outlined in section 2.5.1.3 serve the needs of the private gondola station, not the public State Park. If State Parks had additional funds for bathrooms, this is not the likely location they would site them.

The bridge over Broadway, identified as Design Option E (p. 21 Exec Summary), is a red herring. This bridge has already been identified as a key missing element, has been designed by State Parks, and has been targeted as a long range goal to be funded by State Parks.



LA ART makes no promises of funding this bridge so including it in the DEIR merely confuses and misleads the public into thinking these two projects are somehow linked. They are not. Eventually the Broadway bridge will be funded and built, if not now then from a future bond measure.

State parks typically take decades to be fully realized and we recognize that LASHP still has missing elements. However, the inclusion of Design Option E in the DEIR suggests a quid pro quo: destroy the southern part of the park in exchange for a bridge up to Broadway that would be funded by taxpayers. It is a cynical attempt to confuse the public into thinking the gondola project would be the reason a bridge would be built, when in fact, this bridge will become a reality anyway in the future with public funds.

## In Conclusion

We find this project highly objectionable from an environmental justice perspective. LA State Historic Park was born from an outpouring of community activism from those who had historically been ignored. Community members joined with a coalition of 35 neighborhood, urban environmental, and social justice organizations to form the Chinatown Yard Alliance to fight a proposed warehouse development in favor of a new park. Recognizing the site's significance to the history of Los Angeles, as well as the need for neighborhood green space, the State of California purchased the parcel in 2001. In 2003, the Cornfield Advisory Committee was established to mirror the complexity and diversity of the original Alliance and lead a community-driven planning process that established an overall vision for the new park design.

After this long-fought struggle to transform a railyard brownfield into a lush, green oasis, park users deserve to have their original uses and designs for the park respected, and their public land protected. A project such as this would never be proposed over New York's Central Park, so why should the residents of Northeast LA be treated any differently?

This infrastructure project now threatening LASHP joins a long history of other projects once considered vital and worthy of sacrificing a State Park. In the early 21st century, high voltage power lines through Anza Borrego Desert State Park to bring solar energy to urban areas, and a toll road through San Onofre State Park to reduce congestion, both raised this question: when, if ever, is it acceptable to sacrifice a state park for a new proposed use? In both of the above instances, alternatives were found that saved the parks AND met the goals of the proposed projects.

Today, we note that there is indeed another way to meet the goals of reducing emissions and vehicle miles traveled (VMT) for Dodger Games: the Dodger Stadium Express. Electrifying the buses used for the Dodger Express and expanding their number would both meet the goals of this gondola and provide additional opportunities to reduce VMT and emissions elsewhere in the city on non-game days. We therefore



support the Transportation Systems Management Alternative, also identified as the Environmentally Superior Alternative, described in the Executive Summary on page 19.

Today LA State Historic Park is well used by residents, neighbors, and visitors from throughout the city, and has also become a vital, climate resilient native landscape supporting local wildlife. We thus urge you to reconsider the DEIR's claim of "not significant" park impacts from the gondola project.

With sincere regards,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Kathleen Johnson', with a long horizontal flourish extending to the right.

Kathleen Johnson  
Executive Director  
Los Angeles River State Park Partners

cc: Karen Bass  
Eunisses Hernandez  
Kevin de Leon