



“Our County Open Space, Built Environment & Biodiversity” Public & Private Sector Workshop Summary

Workshop Overview

UCLA convened public and private sector leaders across Los Angeles County to provide input on the topics of Landscapes and Ecosystems in L.A. County and their intersections with housing and land use, climate adaptation, water, and other cross-cutting sustainability topics. The “Open Space, Built Environment & Biodiversity” workshop, held on October 23, 2018 at Studio-MLA in Boyle Heights, convened 71 attendees representing 47 public agencies, private companies, recreational and cultural facilities, and business and planning associations.

Stakeholders participated throughout the three and a half-hour workshop in various breakout sessions that allowed them to refine, rewrite, and prioritize Landscapes and Ecosystems-related goals and strategies that will drive the Our County plan.

Workshop Proceedings

Laurel Hunt and Ari Simon from UCLA began the workshop with an overview of the stakeholder engagement process and the workshop. Gary Gero, L.A. County Chief Sustainability Officer, provided an overview of the *Our County* plan development process. Studio-MLA founder Mia Lehrer welcomed participants to the studio and spoke on the intersection of ecological planning in the region and her landscape architecture firm’s history and local involvement. Sean Kennedy from UCLA IoES’s California Center for Sustainable Communities (CCSC) followed with a presentation covering key background information, data, and regional findings related to topics such as protected lands, biodiversity, access to recreational facilities, urban development, gentrification, and climate change. Stakeholders in the room all received an accompanying briefing document outlining the information in the briefing presentation. The stakeholders received this document ahead of time to review and UCLA also provided copies at the workshop.

After the group presentations, workshop participants met in breakout groups to provide feedback on general Landscapes & Ecosystems draft goals that were included in the briefing and framed the discussion. Participants answered questions about what they feel biodiversity and habitat mean in the region, and what they see as its relationship to the built environment. This conversation spurred the group’s wider discussion about and reworking of the goals.

The second breakout session began with an activity where participants each selected one goal that aligned with their professional and personal experience and shared stories of successful implementations of related strategies. These one-on-one conversations led to a brainstorm amongst the full group of strategies that relate to the draft goals. Participants developed a list of Landscapes and Ecosystems-related sustainability strategies and dot-voted for ones they felt L.A. County should prioritize through the Plan. The participants shared these results in a report back to the entire audience of attendees.



The final breakout session had attendees pair off and come up with an idea for a public-private partnership opportunity that aligns open space, the built environment, and biodiversity. The L.A. County Chief Sustainability Office delivered closing remarks to wrap-up the workshop and stakeholders completed a feedback survey.

This summary report is a compilation and synthesis of over 600 comments that the Stakeholder Engagement Team was able to capture through butcher paper notes, typed transcription, and written note cards, as well as written feedback received after the workshop.

Key Takeaways

- Stakeholders want to see L.A. County create partnerships with schools, places of worship, and cultural organizations to **ensure better and more equitable ecological literacy** amongst youth as well as for adults. This was broadly understood to include increased education as well as increased participation, with particular effort placed in communities with less geographic proximity to established ecological resources and/or with less financial resources.
- Commenting on the need for more people-oriented goals and strategies, stakeholders highlighted parks and open space facilities as **opportunities for local hire as well as for local volunteerism**. Maintenance and management emerged as key issues that require alternative approaches, and stakeholders want L.A. County to look towards local communities as part of the solution.
- Participants expressed the need to **recognize places in and around the built environment as spaces of habitat**. They noted that plazas, sidewalks, streets, and spaces in the public realm are highly accessible landscapes that can connect communities, meet climate adaptation needs, and help forge public-private partnerships.
- Throughout the discussions, participants pushed for **enacting land use and transportation planning policies that ensure density and habitat connectivity**. Stakeholders want to see the Plan strengthen L.A. County's ability to prioritize infill development and stop threatening open spaces with new uses. They support development policies that value existing habitat in favor of replacements for lost natural resources. Participants also feel that the Plan must respond to homelessness and the housing crisis.
- Much of the feedback shared centered around **supporting communities' own visions and initiating deeper engagement**. Participants want to see actions in the Plan that encourage residents to take the lead through their own land use decision-making, programming, and data collection. They feel L.A. County's role is thus to offer community-led visions funding and feasibility. It was generally agreed that the draft Goals do not emphasize community engagement enough.



Draft Goals Feedback

Throughout discussion of all goals, stakeholders felt there were a few areas missing. Stakeholders argued that community engagement is incomplete in the current goals, and suggested that guidelines are needed for socially responsible community engagement. Participants felt the Goals were not people-oriented enough, expressing that goals need to be established in the context of the human experience and measurable through people's adaption to them. They want to see goal language that emphasizes the human activity of parks and public spaces, whether through better programming, maintenance, or marketing.

Stakeholders continually focused on the link between land use and transportation as it relates to landscapes and ecosystems, arguing that goals must address land use issues in the region that are instigating problems such as the housing crisis and homelessness. They also noted that building both funding and political will are critical needs that should be incorporated into the goals. Finally, stakeholders found that ecological connectivity was missing from the goals, and want to see more prioritization of connecting open spaces, creating habitat linkages, and fostering a region where habitat is incorporated into the built environment.

Goal A: Ensure the region's landscapes and ecosystems meet the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs.

Participants felt that this sounds like more of a vision statement or an overarching theme than a goal, and is too broad. Others felt this goal is too similar to Goal G, because this goal essentially relates back to education. It was argued that this should be combined with Goal F. The phrasing of this goal was an issue, as several participants felt that "needs of the present" is missing specificity, that the goal merits a stronger "urban ecology" component, and that clarification is needed around the term "landscapes".

Participants suggested the goals should include: (1) managing our natural spaces; (2) balancing and connecting natural and urban spaces; and (3) weighing and connecting landscapes and natural lands with people. Finally, some thought that an aspect of the goal should include ecological literacy and an effort to connect natural infrastructure to average citizens.

Goal B: Increase and enhance native biodiversity, habitat, and connectivity.

Stakeholders felt this goal should specifically mention the region's status as a biodiversity hotspot and to add local context. One stakeholder thought that enhancing recreational options and access should be included in this goal. With respect to terminology, a participant suggested removal of the term "native" because non-native species can add value for interconnectivity. "Locally-appropriate" was also suggested as an alternative. Adding the term "through infrastructure and engineering," was also requested, since this goal is on the cusp of recognizing that we need to decide how much open space is appropriate.

Goal C: Ensure parks, open space and natural areas benefit human and ecosystem health in the context of a changing climate.

Stakeholders suggested splitting this into two goals: one around human health and one around ecosystems health. They felt the goal should be modified to add social justice concerns and that the right to shelter, as part of human habitat, should be integrated here. Participants thought reference to both ensuring no green gentrification and focusing on water and coastlines were necessary to strengthen this goal.



Goal D: Ensure parks, open spaces, and natural areas are resilient in the face of drought, wildfire, climate change, and gaps in maintenance.

It was suggested that this goal should include the resilience of the entire County and the built environment, as those affect the resilience of natural areas. Stakeholders were confused by the implication in this goal that there always will be gaps in maintenance. It was agreed that this goal needs to push for action to prevent climate change rather than merely being resilient in the face of change. Some felt that there were areas of resilience that were missing from this goal, from “earthquakes” and “flooding” to vandalism in and damage to parks.

Goal E: Create and manage the built environment’s nature-based infrastructure to optimize multiple benefits and ecosystem services.

Stakeholders agreed with the goal in concept, but did not like the wording and overall preferred it be removed. Some felt it can be included but needs more specificity. Participants generally did not understand what is meant by “nature-based” infrastructure. On terminology, one person suggested adding “and maintain” after “manage” because there is a need for resources to manage infrastructure.

Goal F: Ensure all residents have access to parks, beaches and other recreational open space.

Some stakeholders thought that this goal — or a goal — should address access to the development and design processes behind parks, beaches, and open space planning. It was suggested that the goal be broadened to include open space systems that include streetscapes, sidewalks, and plazas. One participant warned against limiting the goal to “residents” and instead suggested “communities” because we want open space to be accessible to employees and visitors too. Safety and comfort were raised as additional considerations to be included.

To some participants, the term “access” was unclear as to whether it means only physical proximity, or affordability, or something else. Others noted that access should not be universal, since some areas should be off limits to people. One stakeholder noted the use of “recreational” implies physical activity and overlooks passive forms of recreation.

Goal G: Improve ecological literacy.

This goal was criticized as too overarching because all the other goals need this to occur. Participants felt the goal needs more emphasis on education, environmental justice, and equity. They felt it is important to make sure economic empowerment and access for disadvantaged communities is better highlighted.

It was suggested that when building support around this goal, partnerships should focus on but not be limited to schools and educational institutions because there is a need to promote literacy community-wide, for all social levels and demographic groups. The goal should also make mention of policymakers among L.A. County’s various spheres of influence, especially in its own departments and staff.

New goal language was suggested, such as, “Evolve ecological literacy that recognizes how built environment can complement open/green spaces.” One stakeholder suggesting adding biodiversity to the goal. One person suggesting changing the goal to “Improve ecological literacy and funding,” or to add “and resources” to the end. One said to use the term “understanding” instead of “literacy” because it is more inclusive.

Recommended Strategies

Stakeholders provided several strategies specifically around parks and public spaces, and many others around other topic areas, including water, housing/land use, community engagement, and ecological literacy.

Stakeholders identified the following strategies, categorized by topic area, as those which the County could help initiate or support. These strategies are generally listed in order of votes received through the dot-voting process.

<p>Parks and Open Space</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • County should support converting open lots into pocket parks, either by buying and repurposing lots or through public-private partnerships. • Use park and public space infrastructure to reduce heat island effect by improving surface permeability, adding more small-scale green spaces, and adding more tree canopies. • Contract private citizens and local nonprofits to plant trees widely throughout LA County. • Utilize greenways like the LA River to connect communities. • Prioritize developing green and open spaces in sensitive receptor areas like schools, senior centers, and hospitals, particularly in disenfranchised communities. • Measure current residents' pedestrian-oriented access to open spaces and parks, avoiding car-oriented measurements. • Open up underutilized spaces to the community.
<p>Water</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Improve water treatment by utilizing natural purification systems, like forests. • Incorporate water into recreational space management to increase cooling effect. • Innovate solutions to wastewater management problems, using available financing methods. • Incorporate water infiltration and bioremediation systems along waterways to improve groundwater recharge and water purification in gardens.

<p>Waste</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Support organizations that improve access to soil and soil remediation, such as LA Compost. • County can encourage repurposing of green waste and use that activity to create local jobs.
<p>Housing</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Create requirements for new developments to include natural vegetation or gardens. • Improve or incorporate local services for homeless populations. • Develop a “master plan” for open/green spaces. • Promote connectivity in the development and planning processes. • Develop policies that value existing habitat in favor of replacements for lost natural resources (i.e., a tree ordinance).
<p>Racial Justice</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Redress historic inequities of neighborhoods located near freeways by providing more space via parks and open spaces through, under, or above freeways. • Allow parks to be open late during cooler parts of the day, while adding safety protocols. • Utilize parks as cooling centers during high heat days, especially in vulnerable communities. • Increase opportunities for access to public water, restrooms, outlets, and other facilities. • Work with public transit to support school field trips to urban parks every afternoon.
<p>Ecological Literacy</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Promote and use urban gardening programs to teach young people about health and wellness. • Provide funding for transit to facilitate field trips for students, using Electrify America and existing Metro efforts as examples. • Promote community ownership of ecological literacy improvements, especially where literacy is already strong. • Structure incentives for ecological literacy programs that appeal to local communities and ensure access. • Support schools creating student requirements to volunteer in environmental education efforts. • Work with schools to develop trainings and services for education and community service. • Train local residents in urban forestry, utilizing cross-cutting benefits in workforce development, park maintenance, etc.

Agriculture and Food Systems	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Analyze the best practices for each site type, utilizing public guidance documents. Support installing urban agriculture and local markets, and link them to the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP).
Governance	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Assess current incentives available for development, and consider opportunities for promoting more sustainable forms of development. Pool data from L.A. County and cities to create a needs assessment, looking to both limitations and opportunities. Increase collaboration between cities and their agencies.
Engagement	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Remove language barriers when engaging with the public, particularly in predominantly non-English-speaking communities. Promote a cohesive message that illustrates the regional vision for landscapes and ecosystems. Coordinate a regional approach to urban forestry management plans among the 88 cities. Promote engagement through park and playground building programs. Develop an asset-based map to determine the strengths of organizations, partnerships, and resources. Work with key stakeholder groups, including homeowners and renters, homeless advocate groups, and other community organizations, ensuring that they are at the table from the beginning, and that stakeholder engagement is equitable, accessible, and not just preaching to the choir.

Additional Strategies

- Develop economic studies to quantify ecosystem services. This may help incentivize funding for ecosystem management.
- Improve opportunities for shade to promote walking, decrease heat island effect, and promote access to public transit.
- Consider wildfire safety into land use and development plans.
- Restrict placement of housing developments, especially regarding their proximity to cliffs.
- Minimize increased flood risk as an unintentional result from city and county wildfire management practices.
- Consider site-specific landscape needs when creating policy (ex.: dry landscapes are not necessarily going to be “green”).
- Create open/green spaces that are resilient to natural disasters like fires, floods, and earthquakes.
- Map biodiversity through citizen science, leveraging the existing Natural History Museum (NHM) program.



- Increase opportunity for art installations, emphasizing site-specific art.



Opportunities for Cross-Sectoral Collaboration

The following are some ideas for initiatives that public and private sector stakeholders expressed interest in collaborating on:

- Developers and parks departments should partner to minimize habitat loss by compensating developers for buying adjacent valuable habitat for the purpose of preservation.
- Public agencies should incentivize or require developers to dedicate space to the public within their developments. While developer would be incentivized to implement this policy, the public sector would preside over long-term maintenance.
- In food deserts, replace grocery stores and shopping centers with multi-use parks that incorporate urban gardens with private growers, water reclamation projects, farmers markets, and employ local citizens at these spaces.
- Cities should partner with developers for community amenities, offering streamlined permits, etc. in return for the private sector paying for amenities.
- Implement and increase public transportation near the new L.A. Stadium in Inglewood through a light rail connection paid for, in part, by new development in the area.

Comparative Assessment

Comparing the feedback from the Public & Private Sector Workshop to the summary report from the concurrent Nonprofit Sector Workshop reveals many overlaps, as well as a few key differences in stakeholder input.

In comparison to the Nonprofit Workshop, feedback from participants at the **Public & Private Sector Workshop** featured:

- Greater emphasis on the need for land use and transportation planning policies that preserve open space and use L.A. County lands more effectively by ensuring density, infill development, and transit connectivity.
- The inherent role that land developers play in parks and open space, particularly through measures like Quimby fees, and that the Plan should value existing habitat in favor of replacements for lost natural resources.
- Clarification that increased access to open space and recreational sites should not be limited to residents, and that increasing ecological literacy and engagement opportunities should include all people – whether they live in, work in, or are visiting L.A. County.
- A focus on planning and policies that are specific to the Los Angeles County region, and addressing common misunderstandings about the ecology and the landscapes here (ex. “it is not a desert”, “it is not like the East Coast of the U.S.”, “landscaping will not necessarily be ‘green’”).
- Attention on L.A. County’s various spheres of influence, and how improved ecological literacy should also be prioritized for the County’s own departments and staff.
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In comparison to the Public & Private Sector Workshop, feedback from participants at the **Nonprofit Sector workshop** featured:

- The nexus between landscapes and ecosystems with public health, and the need to utilize recreational facilities as opportunities to address and promote public health.
- More detailed concerns for the accessibility and health of parks, notably their safety, design, facilities, soil toxicity, hours of operation, etc.
- Focus on the need for climate-adaptive landscapes that can adequately respond to climate change and aftershocks.
- Affirmation that ecological literacy should center and uplift indigenous history and local indigenous practices with nature.
- Overall, a more supportive attitude for the draft Goals.

Feedback at **both workshops** featured many similarities, including:

- Meaningful, inclusive community engagement and decision-making is of utmost importance.
- A concern that improvements to parks, public spaces, and ecological resources will lead to gentrification without coupling improvements with anti-displacement housing policies.
- A focus on the need for connecting open spaces, creating habitat linkages, and fostering a region where habitat is incorporated into the built environment.



- The need to advance ecological literacy through culturally competent programming and educational opportunities, and the strategic need to expand partnerships with schools and places of community gathering.
- Emphasis on using recreational facilities as opportunities for local hire and local engagement.

Appendix: Background Discussion

The following is an overview of the discussion participants engaged in around a series of questions relating to open space and biodiversity, their relationship to the built environment, and the regional context. Though it does not directly respond to the Goals or Strategies that will inform the Discussion Draft of the L.A. County Sustainability Plan, it offers a glimpse into how these topics are regionally understood and key areas of concern for local stakeholdership.

Key Words: sustainability, biodiversity, education, community change, social justice, engagement, resources – money for managing and maintaining, agency – political and economic empowerment, connectivity

Question: What does open space and biodiversity mean to you?

Participants had many ideas on what open space and biodiversity mean. Often, they noted that open space is not simply for human use, but can be a place for interspecies equity where people can learn to respect and appreciate nature. In addition to recreation, they shared how open space offers essential ecosystem services such as improving air quality, water management, and mental health.

Participants noted that particularly for urbanized areas, open space serves as oases and as centers for community engagement. They noted that open space is not necessarily green, and includes plazas and other built, shared community space. Open spaces were framed as an opportunity for community ownership. However, it was also noted that conflicting uses often create open space issues, such as those between urbanized and natural spaces or between passive and active recreation.

Outside of human use, open spaces were described as places for habitat health and promotion of biodiversity, where species and systems can co-exist and be protected. Although use of open space by native species was stressed, participants also argued that the inclusion and protection of non-native species can also be important, such as when they are better for pollinators or more resilient in the face of climate change. Connectivity between spaces was mentioned as essential for biodiversity.

Question: How do biodiversity and open space relate to the built environment?

Open spaces were described as a cultural means for connecting to the land, a resource for public health, an important means for habitat connectivity, a way to plan for climate change and future population growth, and an opportunity for placemaking that enhances the built environment. Participants shared that many “open spaces” are owned or accessible by a privileged few, and that those areas are sometimes protected to the detriment to other human communities.

Participants noted L.A. County’s history of overdevelopment with regard to housing density and transportation, and that that development has consistently failed to emphasize open space or passive forms of recreation. Although transportation has historically been seen as a means for freedom and for seeking out nature in an escape from the built environment, participants felt that there is a need to repurpose the built environment itself by transitioning more private space — the means through which most people relate to space most of the time — to public space. For example, private vehicle parking could be transitioned to open space or public access uses. However, changes in public values would lie at the heart of such transitions. For examples of how to re-orient community values and to transition private space to public/common space, one stakeholder suggested looking to European and Central/South American-style urban space models, which incorporate town squares, plazas, and parks to a greater extent.



Participants raised several specific areas of concern and action, such as the L.A. River – an opportunity to address open space by returning some of the watersheds to a natural state, but also a potential locus of gentrification if development is left underregulated. Other areas mentioned were the opportunity to address schools to increase ecological literacy, to rethink blacktop surfacing, to bring in more porous surfaces, and to institute strategies that will help with biodiversity and tree cover. Stakeholders requested increased quantification of the benefits of nature on health and well-being, as well as looking beyond the traditional measure of “parks per people” to understand actual goals for open space.

Question: How do open space, biodiversity, and the built environment affect the region specifically?

This question was seen by some as leading to another question: How can groups in L.A. County coordinate land use decisions to manage conflict? There is a need to consider who has influence and how that influence interacts with the politics of land-use decision-making. Additionally, different priorities reign across different regional decision-making entities, ranging from city and county governments to local tribes. Participants felt that local engagement will help deduce what it is that people actually want. Questions arose as to how much L.A. County should weigh local opinion: do they prioritize residents and how they use the space, or do they prioritize the natural habitat and preserve it in its natural state?

Regionally, participants saw a need to improve the ecological literacy among local policymakers. Because L.A. County has extensive urban areas, participants expressed a need for architects and urban planners to integrate landscapes and open spaces into urban areas at every level and with every project, and to stretch the boundaries of architecture to accommodate nature in the densest areas.

Stakeholders bought up a desire for L.A. County to take the lead on innovative forms of open space, such as parks on the rooftops, railways, and other linkages.

The role of open space in the face of disaster was briefly discussed. Given recent wildfires, how do we protect open space that are both fuel systems and the first line of defense? Resilience was mentioned as a cross-cutting issue that should be present in all strategic plans.