



## CITY OF GLENDALE, CALIFORNIA REPORT TO THE CITY COUNCIL

### **AGENDA ITEM**

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Report: Verdugo Wash Visioning Report

1. Note and File and provide direction regarding design concepts and next steps.

### **COUNCIL ACTION**

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**Item Type:** Report Only

**Approved for** November 15, 2022 **calendar**

### **EXECUTIVE SUMMARY**

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In April of 2021, staff began the Verdugo Wash Visioning Study. The study was aimed at identifying opportunities to re-imagine the Verdugo Wash as an active transportation spine, while also pursuing opportunities for open space and sustainability. The visioning process was intended to identify the opportunities and limitations of a modified wash, and for City Council to determine if the study warranted additional work. As a visioning process, this is a very high-level concept of the possibilities within the wash. Significant detail would need to be developed in subsequent phases regarding operations and maintenance, safety, engineering, and environmental work. The designs that are included in the final report are only preliminary and subject to change as the project continues to develop.

The report presented to Council includes the rich history and background information of the Verdugo Wash. It also includes analysis on the flood control performance of the channel, mobility opportunities, sustainability, and hydrology analysis. The concepts presented in the report are informed from these studies and history, as well as the public engagement that was conducted throughout the visioning process. Upon review, staff is seeking feedback on the design concepts, as well as direction on future phases of work related to advancing the design.

## **COUNCIL PRIORITIES**

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- **Mobility and Infrastructure** – Providing recreational space, active transportation opportunities, and contributes to the well-being and health of our citizenry.
- **Environmental Stewardship**– The project will incorporate enhanced vegetation and other sustainable strategies to mitigate the urban heat island effect and stormwater runoff.

## **RECOMMENDATION**

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City Council provide feedback on the final visioning report, on the design concepts, and direction related to next steps and future phases of the project.

## **BACKGROUND**

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The Verdugo Wash is a 9.5-mile-long flood control channel that interfaces with 15 distinct neighborhoods throughout the city. Prior to its channelization, the Wash served as a vital source of life for the Tongva tribe, the original inhabitants of the immediate area. Though not a formal river, the Verdugo Canyon provided valuable resources through vegetation, wildlife, acorns, and water. Combined with the favorable climate, Crescenta Valley and the northern terminus of the modern day wash were an important and vital village for the Tongva people.

As Glendale emerged as a new city in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, the Verdugo Canyon was important feature of the landscape. But significant flooding events in 1933 and 1934 caused extensive damage and loss of life. Dozens perished in the 1934 New Year's Day flood, prompting the need to channelize what would become the Verdugo Wash. The creation of the modern day wash allowed for the flow of water and debris without causing significant flooding events, protecting both life and property. While the channelization has served its purpose in reducing flood risk, it has eroded many of the natural benefits that the former canyon provided. The city was also fragmented by the concrete channel and eliminated the opportunity for much needed biodiversity through substantial portions of the city.

Originally identified in the 2012 Bicycle Transportation Plan, the Verdugo Wash was perceived as a potential opportunity to create an active transportation spine that would connect to the broader pedestrian and cyclist network of the city. As part of the 2020-2021 fiscal year budget, City Council allocated funding to begin a visioning study to understand the possibilities for alternative uses within the wash, focused on the premise of active transportation, the creation of new open space, and the enrichment of the natural environment. Following a nationwide search which resulted in over 20 submittals, Imelk was selected as the lead design consultant to assist in developing the initial analysis and design concepts, while identifying the various possibilities of the wash. Initial analysis and work commenced in April of 2021.

## **ANALYSIS**

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The consultant team and city staff began with a tour of the wash facility to assess the existing conditions and to better understand the physical space that exists within the

wash. In-depth analysis was conducted of the existing and surrounding conditions to understand the influences of the existing transportation network, existing civic and recreational assets, and adjacent land use patterns along the wash. This initial framework assisted in helping to understand the potential influences of a re-imagined wash and its potential impacts and benefits it may have to surrounding neighborhoods. It also allowed for the building of a framework and understanding of how the design of the wash would need to be contextually sensitive to these different neighborhoods along the wash.

### *Overall Design Concept*

At the beginning of the visioning process, early ideas considered creating a soft bottom of the Wash. This would include the removal of the concrete floor and returning to exposed soil. This intent was to have the floor of the Wash function as a natural river while presenting opportunities to return natural habitat and vegetation. After extensive analysis this concept was deemed infeasible. This is primarily due to the fact that the prior condition of the Wash was not a true river, as there is not a consistent body or flow of water within the area. As such, softening of the bottom of the Wash would not complete the objective of sustaining wildlife or vegetation without the consistent flow of water. Additionally, the Verdugo Wash must retain its ability to serve as a flood control channel. Given the speed of the water flow and the need to move the water through the wash quickly in order to prevent flooding, the softening of the Wash bottom would slow the flow of water and increase flood risk.

Upon this analysis and evaluation, a new alternative was developed that would preserve the function of the Wash as a flood control channel. The current alternative would include a raised platform that would allow water to flow under the Wash during a typical rain condition. During more significant events, the platform and all additional elements would be able to withstand the flow and be submerged by water. With the elevated platform, deep planting wells would be created to support significantly enhanced vegetation. The platform height could be calibrated in a number of ways in response to local conditions. The pathways for pedestrians and cyclists could be set at different heights in order to appropriate for its surrounding context. In areas where it is predominately single-family residential, the pathways could be set lower to respect privacy of the surrounding land uses, and the planting wells and vegetation could be located to create a buffer between the pathways and surrounding development patterns. In more urban and commercial areas, the pathway could be set at a higher elevation to promote access and interface with the surrounding land uses. It should be noted that while the platform would be designed to withstand significant rain events, the entire Wash would be closed during rain events for safety.

### *North of the Debris Basin*

The area north of the debris basin and Oakmont Country Club is distinctly different from the portions south of the debris basin. The Wash itself is much narrower than other segments and is primarily abutted by single-family homes. The report illustrates potential concepts, but additional hydrology analysis has shown that without changes to the

physical Wash, interventions consistent with the rest of the Wash design concepts would not be feasible. A design that is consistent with the balance of the project would require increased depth or width of the existing Wash. Both would be a significant infrastructure undertaking and would likely be cost prohibitive. Furthermore, widening of the Wash would have significant impact to adjacent properties and would not be possible.

Additionally, as part of public engagement, conversations with neighborhoods north of the debris basin exhibited a clear lack of desire for the project to connect with their neighborhoods. This was largely due to concerns related to impacts on surrounding properties such as privacy, as well as public safety. Lastly, the character of the neighborhoods north of the debris basin is significantly different than the southern portions. These neighborhoods are primarily single-family with limited to no commercial or civic uses in the immediate area. As such, staff believes that given the prohibitive nature of the existing infrastructure as it relates to any modifications and combined with the lower density and lack of significant nodes of commercial, recreational, or civic uses, that any further work in this area should be suspended if the project is to advance to next phases. Design work would not be recommended in any future phase, but conversations would be ongoing to understand if there are mitigating measures that could address their concerns.

#### *Debris Basin and Oakmont Country Club*

The debris basin represents a unique opportunity to enhance the natural habitat. This is also considered to be the northern terminus per the recommendation outlined above. As an area intended to retain water, it presents an opportunity to enhance the natural landscape and habitat through vegetation and re-wilding of the area. This would also incorporate improvements for pedestrian and cyclist use that would encourage a “light-touch” that would minimally impact the existing basin. As an area intended as respite from an urban environment, the design calls for boardwalks and pathways that cause minimal disturbance, and an opportunity to absorb the enhanced natural environment that would be created as part of the design.

The portion of the Wash through the Oakmont Country Club is unique in both its setting and form. The only segment with a box channel, it also traverses through the center of the golf course. It should be noted that individual conversations were conducted with the Country Club, and any advance of the design work would take many additional conversations to ensure that elements such as privacy, safety, and sound were addressed. It would also include the development of an alternative that may go off the route and not through the golf course.

The current concept allows for separated pedestrian and cyclist paths. Limited open space is offered in this segment as it is intended to be a place to pass through, rather than linger, in order to ensure minimal interference with the golf course. This would also include interventions that would provide visual screening for the users of the golf course, and protection for those that would pass through this segment. This initial concept only demonstrates the interventions within the Wash, and not those mitigating features which

will be further explored in subsequent phases.

### *South of Oakmont Country Club*

The remaining segments of the Wash are a wider box channel compared to points north. This presents new opportunities for open space and creating social spaces that encourage engagement. Directly south of the Country Club, there are a remaining number of single-family neighborhoods. As such, the concepts call for spaces that are more passive such as landscaped areas, opportunities for engagement on the history of the Wash, and uses that are respectful to the surrounding context. As this area is wider, dedicated paths can be created for pedestrians and cyclists to minimize potential conflicts between the two modes, and ensure a safe active transportation environment. Planting wells would be deeper and wider in this segment, given the size of the wash. This would allow for more substantial planting contributing to enhanced privacy and beautification.

As the route moves further to the south and west, there are more opportunities to incorporate active recreational elements and social and civic engaging places. This could include playgrounds, performance spaces, and other uses that are conducive with a denser and more commercial-oriented environment. Pathways for cyclists and pedestrians would remain separated, again with the intent to provide safety for both modes of travel. Similar to other segments to the north, deep planting wells would allow for enhanced vegetation to be incorporated into the project.

It is important to note that the conceptual designs are not location specific. This would be accomplished in future phases to ensure that any proposal has maximum compatibility with the surrounding context. This could include changes in the elevation for the pedestrian or cyclist pathways, as well as the planter beds.

These concepts have been presented and discussed with Los Angeles County Flood Control, which has provided direction regarding access, security, and preserving the wash's role as a flood control channel. Coordination would be increased as the vision becomes clearer in subsequent phases and would also advance conversations with the Army Corps of Engineers.

### *Access, Safety, Security, Privacy, and Future Considerations*

There are a series of existing access points along the wash that will provide access to key locations such as the debris basin and near future stops of the North Hollywood to Pasadena Bus Rapid Transit route. The current report illustrates potential locations, but are not specific to parcels or streets. It would take additional work to better understand the implications of any new access point, such as the existing context and impacts to parking. Rather, the locations indicate a general area that are modeled based upon the opportunity to enhance connectivity for pedestrians and cyclists to key assets and locations along the route. It is important to note that any new access point would not occur on private property, but through existing public property or right-of-way.

Safety, security, and privacy were priority topics from the public engagement events. And while an operations and maintenance plan would be developed in subsequent phases, it was still considered as part of the visioning process. As highlighted earlier, the height of pedestrian and cyclist pathways, as well as planting beds, can be calibrated to ensure that users of the path have limited visual access into homes and to mitigate sound impacts. Additionally, the elevated platform will not always run from wall-to-wall. Separation may exist in particular segments, such as single-family communities to prevent people from accessing private property or accessing the wash in a manner that is not consistent with the defined access points.

Through conversations with police, safety and security could be accomplished through the installation of emergency call boxes and lighting. Much of the wash is visible from surrounding public right-of-way, providing visual access from police whom are conducting their typical patrols. Additionally, the pathways within the wash will remain wide enough for police motorcycles to access in the event of an emergency. To mitigate fire risk, the project will use a fire resistant planting plan consistent with City standards. While much of this will be addressed in future phases of work and through a full operations and maintenance plan, it is important to address these early and to develop an understanding of the types of access, equipment, and visibility will be necessary to ensure a safe and attractive environment for all users.

Future planning and development phases will continue to address these topics and develop more refined plans. As a visioning process, this portion of work only addresses these on a higher level until it is better understood what is possible within the framework of the wash. As these solutions are developed in future phases, work groups will be created by each neighborhood to make sure they are addressing the unique conditions of each community. Additional topics that will be explored in future phases will include stormwater retention and treatment, groundwater recharging, wildlife connectivity, environmental and indigenous people education, and public art.

### *Next Steps*

Staff is seeking input and feedback from City Council regarding the final report and design concepts for the Verdugo Wash, as well as any additional considerations that the Council may wish to see examined in future phases of work. It should be noted that if the City Council wishes to proceed with future phases, staff recommends that the portions of the Wash north of the debris basin be excluded from future study, but not from public engagement. On November 3, 2022, Assemblymember Laura Friedman presented the City with \$6 million in funds to be used towards future phases of work. City Staff continues to pursue additional funding sources for future phases of work as well.

Upon Council's direction to continue the study, staff will draft a Request for Proposals (RFP) that will include the feedback heard from City Council, as well as the public and Commissions. Staff will return to Council and ask for authorization to release the RFP. This portion of the work would be funded by the State provided \$6 million, in addition to any other grant and funding sources that Staff is able to identify.

A subsequent phase of work would include:

- Preliminary engineering;
- Environmental review;
- Significantly expanded public engagement;
- Design refinement;
- Public art plan; and
- Limited construction documentation.

## **STAKEHOLDERS/OUTREACH**

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Various forms of outreach were conducted during the visioning process. While the project was launched during the Covid-19 pandemic, additional efforts were made to solicit input and feedback from the general public. This process began by creating a project based website ([www.verdugowash.com](http://www.verdugowash.com)) by providing a brief history of the wash and requesting input on how the public would like to see the wash re-imagined. The surveys were allowed participants to input their specific neighborhood so that the design team could better understand each neighborhood's specific interests, concerns, and desires. Subsequent surveys were also released that allowed participants to identify precedent examples and where they could imagine a similar intervention in their neighborhood. It gave respondents the opportunity to identify the type of character that they would like to see adjacent and within their community. The final online survey allowed respondents to rate their favorability and provide written responses to the initial design concepts. The website provided a means to subscribe and stay up to date on any changes during the process.

Support for the project was relatively strong from website respondents. When asked how strongly they supported a re-imagined Wash (1=little to no support and 5=strongly supported) the average score was 4 out of 5. When asked what was most important to a re-imagined Wash, respondents stated that pedestrian and cyclist access, parks and open space, and public safety. A summary of the survey responses is included with the report.

In addition to the online engagement, staff and the design team conducted a number of in-person and virtual meetings. These meetings ranged from various neighborhoods, as well as stakeholder organizations. Neighborhood meetings were sponsored by the subject neighborhood, and were held in the front or backyards or residents so that the conversation could address in-person conditions. This provided an opportunity to have localized conversations and to better understand their input, feedback, and concerns. A larger scale event was also held on February 19, 2022 at three different locations; Verdugo Park, Fremont Park, and the Orange Street storefront. Participants had the opportunity to participate in in-person engagement activities that were originally created for the website including precedent image mapping, anticipated access points and trips, and general questionnaires on the project, interests, and concerns.

Sentiment from neighborhood meetings was mixed to opposed. This was largely focused around elements of public safety and privacy, particularly for those that abutted the wash. The larger community meeting brought primarily positive responses but also questions

and concerns. While the pandemic limited in-person events, those that were held proved to be the most valuable in soliciting input and to have open conversations about concerns and mitigation.

Supporting the general public outreach, a working group was assembled with primary focus on those who had particular technical knowledge related to the project. This included experts in mobility, sustainability, conservancy, parks, those involved with the Los Angeles River project, and general representatives for residents and businesses to help inform the overall feedback. It should be noted that this is and will not be the only working group that will be assembled. This working group was created to provide technical guidance, and if the project advances into advanced phases, a series of working and advisory groups will be established to address specific neighborhood desires and concerns.

Further supporting the outreach efforts, an internal working group was established to assist in providing feedback, responses, and solutions to the input received from the general public. This group was comprised of City staff from Community Development, Parks and Community Services, Police, Public Works, and the Office of Sustainability. This assisted in providing responses and solutions requested by the general public and to also provide input on elements related to public safety, operations and maintenance, and improved sustainability.

Lastly, staff presented the project to various boards and commissions at the City. This included Parks and Community Services Commission, Planning Commission, Sustainability Commission, and Transportation and Parking Commission. Support from the Commissions was strong, primarily focused on the ability to create a landmark asset for the city and to further safe active transportation, sustainable strategies, and an increase in open space.

## **FISCAL IMPACT**

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There is no fiscal impact associated with this report. If Council provides direction to continue the study, the additional cost would be funded by the State's \$6 million in funds, in addition to any other grant and funding sources that Staff is able to identify.

## **ENVIRONMENTAL REVIEW (CEQA/NEPA)**

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Environmental review would be conducted on future phases of the project as the design and plan are refined.

## **CAMPAIGN DISCLOSURE**

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This item is exempt from campaign disclosure requirements.

## **ALTERNATIVES**

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1. Note and file the report, provide feedback on the current design concepts, and issue direction to advance to the next stages of design, study, and analysis. This will ensure that progress continues to be made.

2. Note and file the report, provide feedback on the current design concepts, and direct staff to not pursue additional design, study, and analysis. This would end any additional progress on the study.

## **ADMINISTRATIVE ACTION**

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**Prepared by:**

Bradley Calvert, Assistant Director of Community Development

**Approved by:**

Roubik R. Golanian, P.E., City Manager

## **EXHIBITS/ATTACHMENTS**

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1. Verdugo Wash Visioning Report