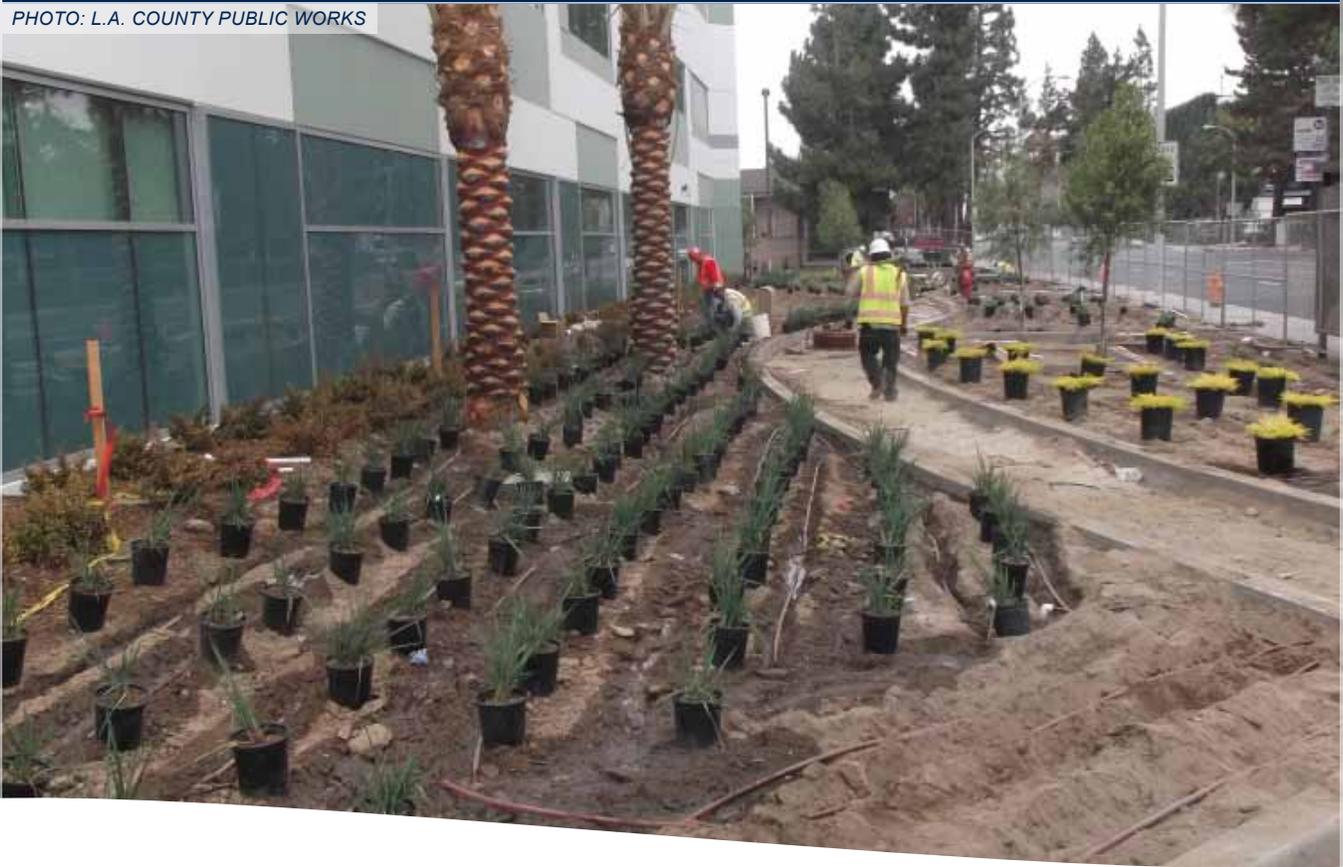


MLK Fitness Garden Planting

PHOTO: L.A. COUNTY PUBLIC WORKS



Bringing Nature Back to Our Cities

MARK RIDLEY-THOMAS



The landscape of Los Angeles in 2012 strikes a dramatic contrast compared to that of the century prior, when orange groves dotted the southland, streams flowed naturally, and open space abounded.

The rapid urban development of Los Angeles County, which grew from just over 500,000 to almost 10 million over the past 100 years, is a profound accomplishment. Modernization has brought many benefits; an accessible public transit system, award-winning architectural designs, and tourist amenities galore, but even these cannot overshadow some of our mistakes.

We have paved our river channels, built freeways that bisected communities, and allowed for development on precious land that was once home to sensitive and unique habitat. The ecological consequences of unfettered development have not been without drawbacks; there is insufficient water to feed

our lawns, our climate is changing, and we must adapt. Our destruction of the natural habitat has had consequences beyond the aesthetic; the built environment now accounts for approximately 40% of all of our carbon emissions. Also, we have jeopardized our ability to provide sufficient open space and parks for our children and families.

Park to Playa Trail Map

IMAGE: ALTA PLANNING



Urban Greening

Garden Installation

PHOTO: L.A. COUNTY PUBLIC WORKS



Before & Proposed: Dominguez Channel Greenway

PHOTO / IMAGE: L.A. COUNTY PUBLIC WORKS ARCHITECTURAL ENGINEERING DIVISION



Existing Multi-Use Trail



Multi-Use Trail with Proposed Improvements

We can look at our dams, aqueducts, freeways, bridges, and buildings with pride, but the future health and prosperity of our county will significantly depend upon a systematic effort to restore and revitalize the natural ecosystems we once rushed to pave over.

In the Second District, we are rebuilding our communities and re-envisioning our natural spaces, one project at a time. Exciting developments include the 13.2 mile Park to Playa Trail, which promises to be the first urban trail that will connect bikers, hikers, and bicyclists from the beach to the communities of Ladera Crest, View Park, Baldwin Hills, and beyond.

With our residential communities almost completely built out, we are exploring unconventional opportunities for creating open space—this means linear parks in Wiseburn, a fitness garden by the new MLK Hospital Campus, and intimate community gardens under utility lines in Florence-Firestone and on the Caltrans right-of-way in Lennox to transform communities as well as their eating habits.

We are investing in multi-benefit projects, such as the Dominguez Channel, where the County Flood Control District will soon begin work on major pedestrian and bike improvements, along with educational signage, because our creeks can and should do much more than provide flood protection.

We have engaged academia, environmental advocates, and other public agencies in developing a Regional Climate Action Plan that will inventory our emissions and develop practical strategies for reducing our carbon footprint. The Board of Supervisors now requires developers of new residential and commercial buildings to abide by green building standards and low-impact design features, and we require it of ourselves as we build new libraries, community centers, and other public spaces.

This era of new challenges calls for new strategies. If we want to bring nature back into our cities we need everyone's input: scientists, policy makers, engineers, builders, financiers, and visionary politicians. In Los Angeles County, we have everything that we need to rebuild and un-pave our urban coastal region in order to create functioning ecosystems and healthy communities; we just need the collective will to do it.

¹ US Census

² US Green Building Council

MARK RIDLEY-THOMAS is a member of the Los Angeles County Board of Supervisors and represents the Second District, which includes the cities of Culver City, Compton, Lynwood, Hawthorne, Inglewood, and a portion of Los Angeles in addition to numerous unincorporated areas such as Lennox, Florence-Firestone, Willowbrook, and Athens.