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LANLT Builds and Manages Parks for L.A.'s Underserved Neighborhoods

Glen Duke discusses the mission and projects of the Los Angeles Neighborhood Land Trust.



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*With open space at such a premium in the city of Los Angeles, providing parks for the city's less affluent populations remains one of the region's most daunting challenges. Since its inception in 2002, the Los Angeles Neighborhood Land Trust has quickly built up a reliable fundraising base and an expanding portfolio of open space projects. To detail the challenges of building parks in L.A., TPR was pleased to speak with the chair of the LANLT Board, **Glen Duke**.*

Share with our readers the mission of the Los Angeles Neighborhood Land Trust.

The Los Angeles Neighborhood Land Trust is a young organization. It was established in 2002 with the mission to create small, accessible, community green spaces, like parks and gardens, to address the shortage of open space in L.A.'s dense neighborhoods, and to ensure community participation in every step of the process, both in the creation of the park and in the management of it.

One of the challenges for the creation of neighborhood parks is stewardship, the management of new open space, while the goal of entities like the Land Trust is just to acquire the space. How has LANLT dealt with stewardship?

That is the key challenge. Our management model is to spend our staff time in and with the neighborhood. The neighbors then take the lead in the management of the park after it's built.

At Estrella Park, a subset of the neighborhood has joined a club that is responsible for keeping the park free of crime, of litter, opening and closing the gate in the morning and the evening, and stuff like that. This works because the Neighborhood Land Trust gives them the background and the training to have the confidence that they can do it themselves, and we are there for the times when they falter, as any normal neighborhood group will do, such as if a big light goes out and it becomes a big deal—we can help them with that stuff. And of course, we own the land, which is beyond their capacity.

The L.A. Neighborhood Land Trust (like others in the country) isn't yet fully funded. What assures communities and public officials that, year in, year out, and decade to decade, that local neighborhood groups will carry out their responsibilities for upkeep and community stewardship?

Your readers might be interested to look on the Internet for a report that was created by a joint task force of the private and public people back in August 2002. Councilmember Eric Garcetti was the chair of the task

force, and Reverend Jeff Carr, who is now Mayor Villaraigosa's gang czar, was also a member of the task force. He previously worked for the Bresee Foundation, which had created a little neighborhood park down in Virgil Village. In this report, you'll see that there's an appendix that compares a couple urban land trusts: one in Chicago, one in Atlanta, one in New York, Philadelphia, and Boston. That's where we got our guidance. I feel encouraged every time I see Bette Midler talking about the New York Restoration Project; I think that is our future here.

The first year we did the fundraiser we raised a little less than \$100,000. The second year, we raised a little more than \$100,000. This year we raised almost \$200,000. Our grants have done really well. We got \$75,000 from the S. Mark Taper Foundation, \$50,000 from the California Endowment, a big grant from the Annenberg Foundation, and Kaiser Permanente.

The ability of the Neighborhood Land Trust and other groups to raise project money is enormous. The challenge is raising the operating money each year. So we go each year to the city; they've been very responsive and willing to listen to us. But they don't have money lying around in the basement, so we face many challenges. We need to create a larger pool of private donors and business-based donations that give year-after-year annual donations. That requires a slow build. We've only been operating a couple of years. Once we're able to show a little better track record, I think we'll have some loyal donors who will be more than happy to give large year-after-year contributions. That's how it's done at Bette Midler's group, the New York Restoration Project.

What are the features of the governing structure for the L.A. Land Trust?

The Neighborhood Land Trust is a non-profit with the objective to acquire and own parks. To compare, at the Trust for Public Land, their objective is to buy parks and sell them to people like the Neighborhood Land Trust. We have a board of directors of about 18 folks from a variety of backgrounds in activism. For example, I am one of two landscape architects who are on the board of directors now, and we're charged with providing direction to the organization and raising the money to pay the staff salaries to do the work I described.

So the second part we do in the Neighborhood Land Trust model is to speed the process. In the formation of parks, there's been a shortage of nimbleness—it goes slow. Also, when we negotiate to buy a piece of land, we can have a frank discussion about the value of the land, and the way that the schedule of payments might work, just like a private party would. Whereas when the government negotiates to buy land, they are more constrained in the sorts of deal points that they can hit.

Where does the majority of LANLT's funding come from? How large is your operating and investment budget? And how many park projects are you engaging presently?

The funding for operations comes mostly from a private fundraising event we have every year. We just finished it, and we cleared about \$170,000 from Angelenos, foundations, and small and large contributors. It was really a lot of fun, and it was a good party, too. Each year, like a lot of other non-profits, we approach the political leadership in the city and describe to them benefits that we would bring to the city if they help fund the Neighborhood Land Trust. They have a variety of funding sources at their disposal, and last year they provided \$100,000 of the city's budget for the purposes of maintaining neighborhood

parks. We have, right now, about eight projects under development. We're going to open four or six parks this year in 2007. We have four projects under construction right now. There's a lot going on.

Where are the LANLT projects located?

The Land Trust focuses, as you heard in the mission statement, on underserved neighborhoods where we can really organize people. Estrella Park is down in South L.A., just north of USC. Marsh Street is a skate park that's on the L.A. River in a little neighborhood called Elysian Valley, and that is a really tiny, little park that's under construction now. We have the Marston Street Park, which is in Panorama City. That's a pretty cool little park that we're working to furnish with the city. It was funded through the Anna Bing Trust. We have a fourth project in Historic Filipinotown, and then another one in South L.A. that we're calling 52nd and Broadway until the neighborhood chooses a name meaningful to them. And the last project currently under development is an acquisition of the Frances Avenue Community Garden in Koreatown.

LANLT has entered into a joint-use agreement with LAUSD to site and manage open space activities on school sites. What are the promise and challenges of this arrangement?

We have one project I did forget to mention—the soccer field on the old Ambassador Hotel site. It's not an operating school yet, obviously, but the school district and the neighborhood observed that they're going to have a long construction period and a big piece of land there. So, we made a deal with the school district to operate a soccer field on the site of the Ambassador Hotel, where they're building the school until the school opens. That site has gone really well. It's a winner all the way around.

We've met with the leadership at the facilities division at LAUSD and talked very productively about doing other joint-use proposals, and they want to do them. They really are motivated, and they have correctly identified that if we bring the operating money, we can open their schools' recreational facilities in off hours. So we have a prospective project at Fremont High School in L.A., and we have applied for some Prop O funds to build a watershed-related improvement. But I think that for the Land Trust, in the big picture, the projects that we've mentioned so far are “pocket parks,” but our longer-term progress will be through joint-use with schools.

What operational vacuum does the L.A. Neighborhood Land Trust fill in neighborhoods that the city Recs and Parks Department is unable to fulfill?

I think your question is a little bit off the mark. The Department of Recreation and Parks in the city of L.A., in particular, and in other large cities, operate a lot of pocket parks. At a pocket park (as opposed to a recreation center), no staff is stationed there. They have a person who comes by to mow the lawn and check on it once a day, maybe, but the city of L.A. recreation centers have staff there full-time. The way that the city Department of Recreation and Parks allocates its resources creates these absolutely vibrant recreation centers that are very like family, they represent the director very strongly, they have a sense of a host. In the pocket parks, since there's no staff there, there's no host.

We propose an alternative: to provide park services to the two thirds of Los Angeles children that live outside of walking distance to a park today, by making small pocket parks, and using the existing

neighborhood resources, in terms of the people, the block clubs, and the churches, to organize the people that manage the parks themselves, day to day. I think the Department of Recreation and Parks very much welcomes this type of alternative.

How does LANLT view the promise of the L.A. River Revitalization Master Plan?

We do have the one Marsh Street project along the river. I have not read the whole L.A. River Revitalization Master Plan. I have read the L.A. County master plan for the river's revitalization. The buyer-seller technique that we're able to use because we're a private non-profit, and the ability that we have to access private fundraising money, would allow us to buy parks and manage excess pieces of lay-away along the river. Those specific project actions could create reality there, right now.

We would like to participate more in the L.A. River. The projects just have not come to us beyond the one at Marsh Street. We've had a very good experience there; we are partners with the Santa Monica Mountain Conservancy both in the management and legal matters and in funding—they gave us a grant to help with the capital expenses in that little park. But I think the L.A. River is huge opportunity for Northeast L.A. and Downtown L.A. To the extent that we can raise the operational money to do projects that make that plan real, we will do that.

If we were to come back and have this interview in a couple of years, what would be the subject matter of the interview?

One thing I'd hope for is that I'd be able to say to you that the neighborhood parks are a part of the watershed agenda. We've spent a lot of time in L.A. County wringing hands over the quality of the water in the L.A. River and Santa Monica Bay, and I'd hope that one of the ways that we'll come to address that issue is by changing our neighborhoods so that more of the run-off water flows through grassy fields and neighborhood parks that also function as a place where people can get a little break from the crazy urban life. That would be my hope.
