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L.A. Green Street Turns Polluted Urban Runoff into Clean Water

Sun Valley's Elmer Avenue improves Los Angeles water supply and water quality

Los Angeles — This May a neighborhood in the Northeast San Fernando Valley became a model of sustainability for Los Angeles. With a long term goal of providing enough clean water for future generations, a coalition of non-profit organizations and government agencies has transformed a residential street with frequent flooding problems into a street that cleans up water pollution - enhancing the community and protecting nature in the process.

Initiated and managed by the Los Angeles & San Gabriel Rivers Watershed Council, the Elmer Avenue Neighborhood Retrofit is the culmination of ten years of collaborative research through the Water Augmentation Study, which reveals the potential for capturing urban runoff before it pollutes rivers and the ocean. Elmer Avenue demonstrates the opportunity to recharge Southern California's underground aquifers with stormwater for later use as drinking water. Pollutants are removed through vegetation and soil as this water percolates underground.

"One of the best parts of my job is to bring home funding for projects like this," said Congresswoman Linda Sánchez (D-CA39), who helped secure federal funding for the project. "Southern California is leading the way to make every home, community, and region environmentally sustainable."

Design of Elmer Avenue began in 2005 with a series of community meetings for the residents. Using Spanish-translation when necessary, the Watershed Council asked neighbors what they would like their street to look like. The involvement of residents continued through the design phase and now they actively maintain the improvements. "We are grateful for this project, it not only came out beautiful but when it rains our streets don't flood anymore," said Alicia Gonzales, a 20+ year resident of Elmer Avenue.

"This project is a prime example of how we can help our communities 'go green' even in this struggling economy," said Councilman Tony Cardenas. "Thanks to many government agencies, non-profits and organizations joining forces, an overburdened neighborhood finally received the respect and attention it deserves."

The street functions by directing water from 40 acres of residential land upstream to the aquifer through both active and passive methods. In doing so, Elmer Avenue not only provides 16 acre-feet of groundwater recharge annually (about the same amount of water used annually by 91 people) but also reduces polluted water flowing into the Los Angeles River.

Nancy Steele, Executive Director of the Watershed Council, said "By turning our yards into rain gardens and our streets into water recharge facilities, we can ensure clean water for the future. In contrast to a typical urban street, Elmer Avenue now reduces flooding and water pollution, improves water quality, replenishes groundwater supplies, and increases native habitat."

The project demonstrates multiple "Low Impact Development" strategies on both public and private lands and maximizes permeable surfaces. Additional benefits include conserving water through use of drought-tolerant landscaping, beautifying and cooling the street with trees and native vegetation, increasing wildlife habitat, creating a more walkable and safe street with sidewalks, and solar street lights.

"The residents of Elmer Avenue are now watershed managers," said Rebecca Drayse, Director of TreePeople's Natural Urban Systems Group, a partner with the Watershed Council on the project. "Their homes and street mimic the natural hydrology of the Los Angeles River Watershed, demonstrating the interconnectedness of water and land."

"The Bureau of Reclamation has been an integral partner in the Water Augmentation Study and Elmer Avenue Retrofit over the past ten years", said Bill Steele, Area Manager for Southern California Area Office. "Reclamation is encouraged by this innovative stormwater capture project and the groundwater recharge opportunity it offers this basin."

City of Los Angeles Board of Public Works Commissioner Paula Daniels said "We are grateful to the Watershed Council for their leadership in developing this project and for helping everyone in the city realize how important and viable it is to incorporate our natural environment into the built environment so that our streets and alleys improve water quality."

The City of Los Angeles constructed the public right-of-way as well as new infrastructure. The Watershed Council hired a contractor to work on the private properties, transforming nearly half of the individual front yards with swales, permeable pavers, and native plants.

The new, sustainably designed Elmer Avenue also:

- Increases community awareness of watershed issues and conservation strategies;
- Provides a large-scale demonstration project to serve as a local, regional, and national model;
- Includes project evaluation through monitoring of stormwater flow and water quality pre- and post construction;
- Relies on participation from residents to maintain the improvements.

Project Sponsors and Partners

The Watershed Council partnered with the City of Los Angeles, U.S. Bureau of Reclamation, Metropolitan Water District of Southern California, Water Replenishment District of Southern California, Los Angeles Department of Water and Power, County of Los Angeles Department of Public Works, TreePeople, Urban Semillas, and City of Santa Monica. Additional funding was provided by the California Department of Water Resources. For more information, visit: http://www.lasgrwc.org/elmer.

Over the past fifteen years, the Los Angeles and San Gabriel Rivers Watershed Council has become the center for practical watershed research and analysis in southern California, focusing on the watersheds of the Los Angeles Basin. The Watershed Council is uniquely situated at the intersection of research and policy to drive applied research to improve policy and practice. More information at http://www.lasgrwc.org.

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