

**Alianza de los Pueblos del Río**  
**c/o Suite 1660**  
**1550 Wilshire Boulevard**  
**Los Angeles, CA 90017**

September 29, 2006

re: The Los Angeles State Historic Park, People, and Place

Dear Design Teams:

Congratulations on being selected as a finalist by California State Parks in the competition to design the Los Angeles State Historical Park at the Cornfield (LASHP).

On behalf of the Alianza de los Pueblos del Río, we urge you to incorporate several principles in the proposed design of the park. A balanced park at the site should reflect the history of the people and place. This includes people of color, women, workers, and radicals. Public art and interpretive elements in the park should celebrate the struggles, hopes and triumphs of the generations who have entered Los Angeles through El Pueblo, the LASHP, and the Los Angeles River to reflect the dreams of the community, the purpose of the park, and the vision of the Cornfield Advisory Committee. The park should serve the physical and psychic health needs of communities surrounding the park, the region, and the state by providing places for physical activity. The park should reflect the fact that diverse people use parks differently. The park should be connected to over 100 cultural, historical, environmental, and recreational links in the heart of Los Angeles. The Los Angeles State Historic Park should not be planned in isolation, but should be planned with El Rio de Los Angeles State Park, El Pueblo Historical Monument, and other resources. (Enclosed maps 101, 104.)

The Park should reflect the values at stake to bring people together – providing children the simple joys of playing in the park, improving health through physical activity, equal access to public resources, democratic participation in deciding the future of the community, educating the public, local jobs for local workers and economic vitality for all, spiritual values of protecting the earth and its people, and providing the clean air, water, and ground benefits of safe and healthy urban parks.

These points are consistent with the work of the legislatively mandated Cornfield Advisory Committee, which stressed the essential themes of culture and history, connectivity, recreation, and transportation.

We incorporate by reference the enclosed documents that reflect the values that have guided the struggle to create this park, which the Los Angeles Times called "a heroic monument" and a "symbol of hope."

The mission of the Alianza de los Pueblos del Río is to ensure that master plans for revitalization and development along the Los Angeles River promote democratic participation and equitable results, including the creation of healthy and safe parks, schools, and communities. The Alianza seeks

economic, environmental, equitable, and healthy development for all communities along the River for generations to come.

### *History and Connectivity*

The City of Los Angeles long ago recognized the local significance of the LASHP site and dedicated it as Cultural Monument #82 for its role as the Southern Pacific's River Station railroad yard. Yet the cultural significance of the property and adjacent area is much broader than the site's use as a railroad yard.<sup>1</sup> The Park provides a place where people can come together to understand and learn from the broader story and diverse viewpoints of the fascinating, influential, and sometimes painful history of Los Angeles.

Most recently, the LASHP reflects the triumph by surrounding communities to secure open and recreation space in a community that had access to neither. The Chinatown Yard Alliance brought together an unprecedented group of over 35 community, civil rights, traditional environmental, environmental justice, religious, business and civic organizations and leaders. This Alliance stopped plans for warehouses there supported by federal subsidies in favor of the Park. But for the Alliance, there would be no park at the site.

The Park lies near the site of the original Tongva village of Yangna, a site marked today by nothing more than a center divider on the Hollywood Freeway. Los Pobladores, the first settlers, included Spaniards, Catholic missionaries, Native Americans, and Blacks. Mexicans and Californios further established the city before statehood. Mexican-Americans, including U.S. citizens, were deported from the site during the depression because of discrimination and the struggle for jobs. Mexican-Americans later lost their homes and way of life when Chavez Ravine was destroyed to build Dodger Stadium with places for 50,000 cars to park and not a single place for children to play. Chinese began arriving in 1850 in search of gold and were relegated to dangerous jobs on the railroad and domestic jobs. The site of the Chinatown massacre of 1871, which first brought Los Angeles to international attention, is now a traffic light. The city forcibly evicted the residents and razed Old Chinatown to build Union Station in the 1930s. The people relocated to new Chinatown across the street from the Park. The Japanese in Little Tokyo were forced into concentration camps during World War II. Bidy Mason, a former slave freed in the 1850s, became a major landowner downtown and a founder of First AME, a major Black church in Los Angeles. Blacks in the twentieth century were forced into South Central by discriminatory land use policies. Italian and French immigrants, some of whom planted vineyards that graced the area, assimilated into the broader culture. The Women's Building that has empowered women artists stands at the site.

Historically, the zanja madre or "mother trench" brought water from the Los Angeles River through the site to El Pueblo and beyond. The area was used for diverse agricultural purposes, including vineyards, vegetables, fruits and nuts, corn, pasture, and plowed land. The diversity of crops is a metaphor for the diversity of the people themselves.

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<sup>1</sup> The City of Los Angeles generally ignores the roles of women and people of color in designating cultural and historical monuments: only 50 out of 700 monuments relate to women and people of color, according to a forthcoming study by The City Project. See *Landmark L.A.: Historic-Cultural Monuments of Los Angeles* (2002).

### *The People Today*

The Park is located within half a mile from El Pueblo de Los Angeles Historical Monument, on what was communal agricultural land during the pueblo's early years. At its northern end, the site is about 150 feet from the Los Angeles River. Within one mile of this once fertile property is the last recorded location of Yang-na, one of the largest Tongva villages in the area. Surrounding the Park are the historic and ethnically diverse communities of Lincoln Heights, Elysian Park, Solano Canyon, Chinatown, Chavez Ravine, and William Mead Homes.

The LASHP lies within City Council District 1 and next to District 13, which have access to 2.5 and 0.35 net acres of parks per thousand residents, respectively. These communities are 68% Latino, 14% Asian, 11% non-Hispanic White and 4% African-American.

### *Public Art in the Public Park*

Public art should reflect the struggles, hopes, and triumphs of the generations who have entered Los Angeles throughout the centuries to reflect the dreams of the community, the purpose of the Park, the vision of the Cornfield Advisory Committee, and the values at stake. Public art at the Park should: (1) directly engage community participation and benefits surrounding communities; (2) tell the story of the people and cultures who are integral to the past, present, and future of the park; (3) include murals, interpretive signs and street banners to educate visitors about the history of the site; (4) honor the diverse community coalition that created the Park; (5) include murals, community art, photography exhibits, and oral histories as "family albums" and local artists to reflect the views and experiences of the surrounding communities; (6) provide educational programs and materials for schools on the environment, the history, and the people; and (7) connect with local art projects and interpretive displays in the historical buildings at El Pueblo and at the Southwest Museum.

### *Physical Activity to Improve Health*

The Park should include large open areas for physical activity to improve physical and psychic health, integrated harmoniously with the natural setting and the cultural and historical values at stake, as recommended by the Cornfield Advisory Committee. California Parks and Recreation Director Ruth Coleman has publicly agreed that the "Cornfield will have open space for multiple uses, which can include soccer, which is what happens at Will Rogers [State Historic Park], for example."<sup>2</sup>

The California Department of Parks and Recreation itself has eloquently expressed the value of recreation:

The importance of recreation in modern society cannot be overestimated. The opportunity to alter the pace of modern life and experience historic and natural settings or more actively participate in outdoor activities has been shown to improve societal

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<sup>2</sup> State Parks Director Responds to Critics of Cornfield Plan, The Planning Report (July 2003).

well-being by maintaining the physical and emotional health and wellness of individuals and contributes to reduction in crime. Recreational activities on State, local, and regional parklands, open space, and trails provide strong support for community values and serves as a mechanism and social bridge for integrating people of all races, ages, incomes, and abilities. (Public Comments submitted by Ruth Coleman, Director, California Department of Parks and Recreation to California High Speed Rail Authority 11 (August 19, 2004).)

Physical activity is a critical part of the history and cultural heritage of the site. Tongva families played a game called "shinny" and other field sports along the Los Angeles River. California's native games and toys are a reflection of the natural history of the state-its mountains, rivers, deserts, wetlands, woodlands, and seashore-and California's first people. Native Californians had a passion for football-type games. They drove, tossed, or batted balls of mountain mahogany, braided buckskin, or polished stone, stuffed deerhide or seasoned laurel knots. Teams tried to score by getting the ball past the other team and through goal posts, or through a hole. These were river games, played along river beds throughout California.<sup>3</sup>

Places for physical activity will help meet the health needs in the surrounding communities and region. Children of color disproportionately live in communities of concentrated poverty with no access to parks or to schools with five acres or more of playing fields, and with no access to a car or decent transit system to take them to parks and schools. (Enclosed maps 218, 601.)

Approximately 282,967 children live within 5 miles of the Park. These children and their families and friends do not have places for physical activity. 40% of the children in the surrounding state assembly district are obese. Fully 87% of Los Angeles public school children are not physically fit. Chinatown until now has had no park, and still has no middle school or high school with playgrounds, playing fields, or green space. The only elementary school there does not have a single blade of grass. The only playground in the nearby William Mead housing project was long closed because of environmental contamination.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Jeannine Gander, GRASS GAMES & MOON RACES: CALIFORNIA INDIAN GAMES AND TOYS 15, 17, 20, 23, 25 (1995).

*Conclusion*

We urge you to create a design for a balanced Los Angeles State Historic Park that reflects the diverse history of the people and place through interpretive elements and art, provides places for physical activity to improve physical and psychic health, and is connected to El Pueblo, Taylor Yard, the Los Angeles River, and the myriad other resources in the area.

Sincerely,  
Alianza de los Pueblos del Río

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Enclosures:

Robert García, Erica S. Flores, Julie Ehrlich, *The Cornfield and Flow of History: People, Place and Culture*. The City Project, Center for Law in the Public Interest (2004).

Robert García, Erica Flores Baltodano and Chris Hicks, *Public Art in the Public Park: People, Place and Power in the Los Angeles State Historic Park*. Policy Brief, The City Project, Center for Law in the Public Interest (2005).

Robert García, Erica S. Flores, Elizabeth Pine, *Dreams of Fields: Soccer, Community and Equal Justice*. The City Project, Center for Law in the Public Interest (2002).

*Healthy Parks, Schools and Communities: Mapping Green Access and Equity for the Los Angeles Region*. The City Project, Center for Law in the Public Interest (2006).

Jesus Sanchez, "L.A.'s Cornfield Row: How Activists Prevailed," L.A. Times, April 17, 2001, A1.

Robert García and Erica Flores, *Anatomy of the Urban Park Movement: Equal Justice, Democracy and Livability in Los Angeles*, chapter in Robert Bullard, ed., *The Quest for Environmental Justice: Human Rights and the Politics of Pollution* (2005).

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Cornfield Concept Plan, General Plan Preferred Alternative (July 2004).