

*Community Driven Park and School Projects in South Los Angeles*

**COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT AND**

**COLLABORATIVE GOVERNANCE PLAN**

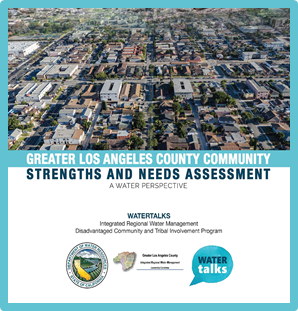
**Past Community Outreach and Engagement Conducted**

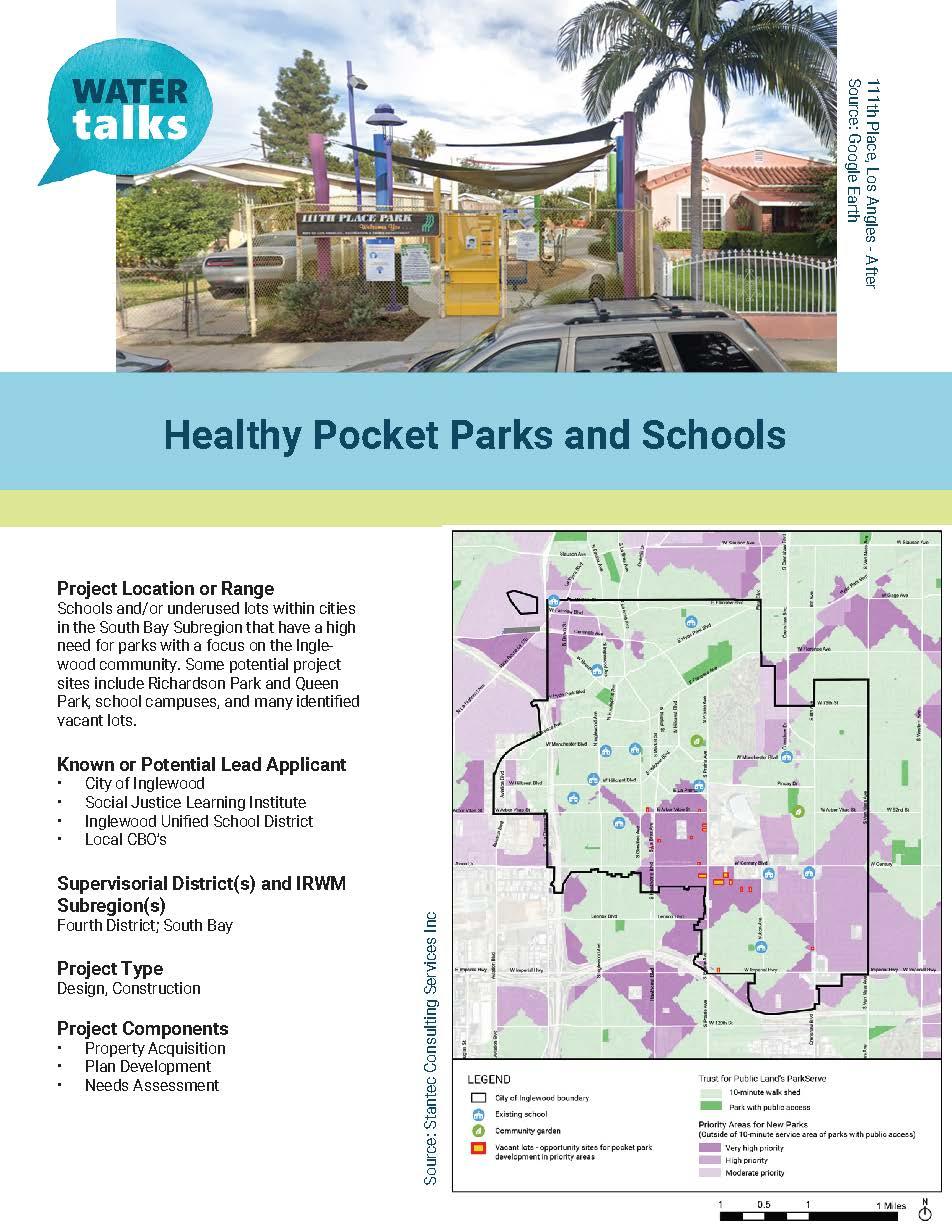
TreePeople, Council for Watershed Health and many of the Collaborating Entities in the Park and School Projects Program have been involved for the past several years in the Disadvantaged Community and Tribal Involvement Program ($9.3M, California Proposition 1) known locally as **WaterTalks**. We focus on this program as evidence of our collective experience because the Park and School Projects now proposed for EPA funding were either developed through the WaterTalks process, or address the same priorities identified in WaterTalks.



WaterTalks provides models for the Park and School Projects Program to follow, including authentic engagement with under-resourced communities and community-driven, water-related project design and implementation in multiple areas including drinking water, stormwater management, wastewater management, water pollution and nature based solutions/green infrastructure. The name “WaterTalks” was selected to move away from the term “disadvantaged community” which creates a communication barrier in local communities. TreePeople leads this program in much of Los Angeles County, including South Los Angeles neighborhoods listed in this proposal. It has run publicly since 2019 and wraps up in March of 2024. WaterTalks was designed with three major components:

1) Community Engagement and Education: efforts began with an initial wave of community engagement and education in 2019 to build awareness of the program. This included the recruitment of more than a dozen community-based organizations with knowledge of local issues and trusted access to residents. Many of these partners were brought together and have worked for more than 4 years to build trust, support and partnerships among each other. Some had experience in the water sector, but many did not, and so were given education and exposure to the complex world of water management in SoCal, so they might become future leaders in water and climate equity. These groups continued engagement with their communities throughout the program

2) Strengths and Needs Assessment: a thorough and historic Strengths and Needs Assessment was conducted in 2020-21 garnering more than 3,500 survey responses, focused on four audiences: WaterTalks communities, water institutions, K-12 school districts and tribal perspectives. The assessment showed that a key community strength is the resilience of residents and their ability to band together to move through challenges and opportunities. Key needs included concerns about and mistrust of drinking water, concerns about surface water pollution, and a need for more shade trees and park space. (While the latter seems disconnected from water issues, it’s important to note that South Los Angeles is severely over-paved, creating excessive and polluted runoff. Parks and trees not only provide cooling benefits for residents, but they also capture massive amounts of rain thereby reducing stormwater runoff.) 

3) Community-driven Project Development and Technical Assistance: Based on the Needs Assessment, water-related projects and programs were identified for development through Technical Assistance. The process for identifying projects was an innovative approach to place community interests as close to the point of project inception as possible. Data from the Strengths and Needs Assessment was reviewed by a team of engineers, community organizers, indigenous staff from a tribal support organization, and program designers to brainstorm projects that would address the needs identified. These were developed into simple sketches (image at left) and shared with the broad coalition of community organizations, who discussed the projects, suggested revisions and ultimately prioritized projects to move forward for technical assistance. This approach placed community needs at the forefront of project and program design.

Project identification went through a multi-step loop of prioritization, design and feedback with the CBOs mentioned in #1, who brought feedback from their constituents. Once identified, the projects were then turned over to project designers, landscape architects and professional engineers for development and technical assistance, at a total value of $2.3 million. The program was also able to leverage special funding opportunities for projects that were ready to apply, assisted in the applications and gained awards for several projects, totalling $10.9 million.

Education has been paramount to WaterTalks, and created many tools for use in the Park and School Projects Program. Toolkits and Story maps were created per community that provided key information about water suppliers and sources of water, water quality and other data to make education as local as possible. These toolkits and story maps are still available on the WaterTalks website *(www.watertalksca.org)*. Local meetings were held with community members to share the toolkit materials and begin the process of listening about local issues and water-related concerns. In many cases meetings were action-based and always held in spaces where community already gathers.

Education included capacity building. Training sessions for CBOs, water agencies and other interested parties were held online and also included site visits to inspire and inform. An introductory Tribal Allyship Training Program was designed and delivered online, providing best practices to support local tribes on water issues, and history on harms that continue to the present day. The program also created the video *California Indigenous Perspectives on Sacred Waters* as a supplement to the training. All online training sessions were recorded for future public access. Training for Collaborating Entities in tribal engagement and technical support continues as a component of the Park and School Projects Program, described below.

**1. Community Engagement Plan Implementation**

#### TreePeople, CWH and Collaborating Partners have several practices in place that create authentic engagement and transparency with disadvantaged and Tribal communities that will be used throughout the Park and School Projects Program. These include:

#### **Outreach methods**

#### Work with partners who already have a long term presence and trusting relationship in the project neighborhoods.

* Be flexible - outreach can take the form of action events (e.g. community tree plantings or exercise classes), hosting education workshops in person at local gathering spaces or online during non-work hours, or tabling at community events.

#### Feedback from the community and Tribes is acknowledged as having value, and therefore every effort is made to provide interview consulting fees or other remuneration for participation, such as giveaways of trees, native plants, water or air filters, or the like.

* Provide training and facilitation between entities as needed. For the Park and School Projects Program a very special program will be provided called Nurturing Connections, to support project leads to work appropriately with local tribal entities in project design and implementation.

#### **Transparency**

* Move at the speed of trust.

#### Be patient; disadvantaged and tribal communities need to work through 250 years of local historic harms with every conversation, and need time to process (mentally and emotionally) any communication from agencies, institutions and people of greater privilege.

#### Be willing to have uncomfortable conversations, knowing it’s a sign of growth and trust building.

#### Do more listening than talking.

* Engage as close to the point of project inception as possible. Don’t wait until the design is 90% complete.

#### Understand that the sovereignty of local tribes is inherent, regardless of whether another government entity “recognizes” or “acknowledges” them. Theirs is the original government of this area, and is to be respected accordingly; this is their unceded land on which we conduct our planning and restoration efforts.

#### **Continuity**

#### Work with partners who carry out regular outreach and engagement activities with constituents such as regular education or advocacy meetings where project updates can be provided. This promotes continuous communication with residents.

* Build engagement costs into project design and implementation budgets to occur at multiple stages.
* Encourage and facilitate conversations with local public agencies to see the value of repeated engagement and avoid the “check-a-box” syndrome.

#### Tribes may or may not elect to participate in projects and programs, but must be kept apprised of activities on their homeland, regardless, throughout the program.

**Mitigating Barriers**

* Meet the community where they are; make use of existing organizations, gathering places and events to inform residents about projects and gain feedback.

#### Provide for basic needs for participation in meetings and events, including refreshments, child care, translation and transportation, as needed and appropriate.

#### Maintain staff and outreach materials that reflect the language and culture of the community; for the project area, that means working in both English and Spanish.

#### Of special note is the use of language that potentially continues harm and reinforces barriers. The Parks and Schools Program will avoid use of certain terms when working publicly, including terms used in this proposal. Examples include:

#### “Disadvantaged” - Use of “disadvantaged” is primarily for technical purposes, such as in this proposal, and its link to public funding guidelines, legislation, appropriations and the like. Communities living with environmental and economic injustice are, in fact, the most “resilient” communities in our area, as residents bind together to face adversity, and continue forward regardless of challenge. To label communities with anything else is disrespectful.

#### “Stakeholder” - the term has many negative connotations, including its use in colonial times, when settlers used wooden stakes to claim land prior to any treaty or land negotiations with Indigenous groups. Given our regional tribes have had ALL land stolen from them, this term is problematic and will likely be replaced with “interested parties.”

#### “Target” - the term is one of many that can imply violence, policing, oppression. The word “focus” is a likely alternative.

* “Nature Based Solution” - there is currently a significant conversation in justice communities as to whether this term is a misappropriation of how indigenous folk have treated the lands and waters on this continent for thousands of years, and another attempt at erasure. This program is not likely to change the term, but sensitivity to it in conversations is important.

**Government Involvement**

TreePeople, CWH and other Collaborating Partners frequently find themselves working in the space between community and public agencies in Los Angeles; in the case of parks and schools it is essential, as it is mostly public agencies who own and are land managers for these properties. Project leads have existing relationships with these land managers; these agencies have already been involved in the development of all these projects. Public agencies are not monolithic; they are people and many of the engagement practices listed above apply equally to building trust in these relationships. The notable addition is the need for agencies to be transparent and accountable to the communities they serve, and if our work on these projects does not recognize and support that need then we will not be successful. Below is a table showing the agencies who will be involved in the park and school projects.

**Table 1. Government Agency Involvement**

| **Project Name** | **Jurisdiction / LA Neighborhood** | **Public Agency / NGO Landowner** |
| --- | --- | --- |
| Sleepy Lagoon at Maywood Riverfront Park | Maywood, CA | City of Maywood |
| Clara Park | Cudahy, CA | City of Cudahy |
| Ramona Gardens Natural Park | County Hospital | LA Housing Authority |
| Jefferson Blvd & Van Buren Place | Exposition Park | LANLT |
| Vermont Square Community Garden | Vermont Square | Garden Council (NGO) |
| Healthy Pocket Parks (52nd St Elementary) | Vermont Square | LA Unified School District (LAUSD) |
| Holmes Elementary School | Historic South Central | LAUSD |
| Harmony Elementary School | Historic South Central | LAUSD |
| Miramonte Elementary School | Florence-Graham | LAUSD |
| Edison Middle School | Florence-Graham | LAUSD |
| 118th St Elementary School | Greater Willowbrook | LAUSD |

**Nurturing Connections**

A very special part of the Park and School Projects Program is the roll out of *Nurturing Connections*. *Nurturing Connections* is a guidance document or framework created through the WaterTalks program that centers California Native American Tribal engagement that is intersectional, fluid and rooted in justice that does not perpetuate harm. The goal of this framework is to provide a resource for community groups, agencies and individuals to learn from tribal voices and introduce guiding concepts to help further understandings around engaging with tribes and tribal members with water projects. These concepts and resources can be applied to building relationships for continued tribal environmental justice and equity projects.

This original idea was birthed through an extensive multi-year process through WaterTalks, which began with a water tribal needs assessment conducted by Sacred Places Institute for Indigenous Peoples. Multiple project ideas flowed from the assessment and resulted in the development of this framework, which is authored and designed by a group of BIPOC (Black, Indigenous and People of Color) professionals who have over a decade of experience in social, environmental and water justice.

For the Park and Schools Projects Program, a training series will be developed based on the guidance document, along with follow up support from the training. Priority will be given to Park and School Project proponents and agencies, but open to interested parties throughout the program’s area of focus. The follow up support will provide project specific application to engage local tribes, including unique practice scenarios to help train before project proponents and agencies engage with local tribal leaders and representatives. Through the training and support, the *Nurturing Connections* guidance document will be updated based on what is learned through the Park and School Projects Program. Funding for the program will include payments to tribal organizations and representatives for their time involved in being part of the Park and School Projects Program.

It is very important to understand that inclusion of the *Nurturing Connections* program allows the Park and School Projects Program to engage and support local tribes who would otherwise be left out of this EPA funding opportunity, because no tribe that has ancestral homeland in what is now Los Angeles County is recognized by the federal government.

Sections of *Nurturing Connections* include:

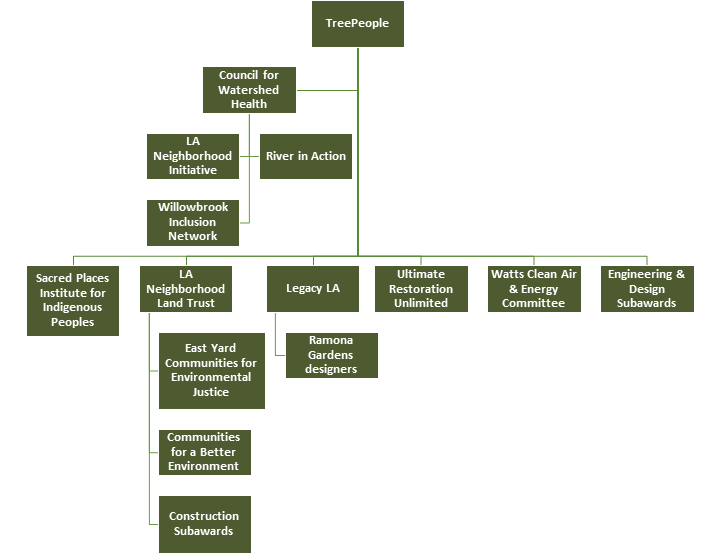
* California Native American Tribal Voices, directly from Gabrielino Tongva, Chumash, Tataviam and other tribal members who have worked in the local water space.
* Guiding Concepts to help non-tribal people do internal and organizational work around authentically engaging tribes.
* Government Tribal Engagement History at the federal and California state levels.
* Concepts in Practice: questions, scenarios and stories from the field to help put the lessons shared into practice.
* Resources including an extensive list of tribal engagement legislation and government plans and frameworks.

**2. Collaborative Governance Structure**

**Coordination**

Below are two graphics; the first is an organization chart showing the contractual or subaward relationships between TreePeople, CWH and other Collaborating Entities. The second is a table showing how these organizations are involved in and responsible for engaging communities around the Park and School Projects.

**Organization Chart - Subaward Relationships**



**Table 2. Engagement Responsibilities**

| **Project / Program Name** | **Project Lead** | **Engagement Partners** |
| --- | --- | --- |
| Sleepy Lagoon at Maywood Riverfront Park | LANLT | EYCEJ, CBE, SPI |
| Clara Park | LANLT | LANLT |
| Ramona Gardens Natural Park | Legacy LA | Legacy LA |
| Jefferson Blvd & Van Buren Place | LANLT | LANLT |
| Vermont Square Community Garden | TreePeople | URU |
| Healthy Pocket Parks (52nd St Elementary) | LANLT | URU, WCAEC |
| Holmes Elementary School | CWH | LANI |
| Harmony Elementary School | CWH | LANI |
| Miramonte Elementary School | CWH | RIA |
| Edison Middle School | CWH | RIA |
| 118th St Elementary School | CWH | WIN |
| Nurturing Connections (Tribal Engagement) | TreePeople | SPI |

*Acronyms for above:*

* *CWH Council for Watershed Health (Statutory Partner)*
* *LANLT LA Neighborhood Land Trust*
* *SPI Sacred Places Institute for Indigenous Peoples*
* *LANI LA Neighborhood Initiative*
* *RIA River in Action*
* *WIN Willowbrook Inclusion Network*
* *EYCEJ East Yard Communities for Environmental Justice*
* *CBE Communities for a Better Environment*
* *URU Ultimate Restoration Unlimited*
* *WCAEC Watts Clean Air and Energy Committee*

**Outreach Methods**

#### Outreach methods follow those listed above in the Community Engagement Plan Implementation section, beginning on page 3.

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#### The key element, stated again, is the importance of working together as a partnership team, that already has a long term presence and trusting relationship in the project neighborhoods. Engagement for each project will be unique but will likely include the following:

* Working with established constituent groups that meet regularly for period updates and discussions. This can include parent-teach groups at all the schools involved, or education/advocacy groups run by the Collaborating Entities or other opportunities.
* Public presentations with discussion and polling at key junctions in the process, especially for the design projects.
* Meeting with local agencies involved, and facilitating between agency staff and community representatives as needed.
* An engagement schedule, number of meetings and other details are built into the Scope of Work for each project for each partner.

**Decision-making Processes**

The Park and School Projects Program will have regular check-in meetings to facilitate communication and decision-making. There are at least three meeting structures:

* Core Group - essentially those who are project leads (TreePeople, CWH, LANLT and Legacy LA), this is likely to be at least a bi-weekly “huddle” to review progress overall, status of each project, successes and challenges, and how the team can support one another. Major decisions affecting the overall program will be discussed within this group and may be taken to the other meeting events (below) as appropriate. To keep the program moving forward and to meet timelines, TreePeople will serve as final arbiter if a clear decision has not emerged from the group’s discussion.
* Project Groups - each project will have its own check-in structure, as organized by the project lead and the other entities involved, to help guide decisions necessary to an individual project.
* Leadership Group (Collaborating Entities) - a structure borrowed from WaterTalks, all organizations will check-in on a regular basis (likely bi-monthly) to review progress and project updates, raise up engagement, equity and related successes and challenges, and receive training on issues that emerge from the project. These issues can be technical (e.g. how to measure GHG reduction from trees planted), addressing barriers (e.g. regulations affecting a project or community beliefs about local agencies) or group issues, such as Community Agreements.
* In all these meetings, notes are taken and as most will be virtual, can be recorded and reviewed by members unable to attend or for follow up questions and actions, and to support transparency of the program.

Whenever possible, and especially in large group decision-making, efforts will be made to do so through consensus using these steps: 1) use tools/processes to allow all participants to rank options with anonymity, 2) review the group result together, 3) encourage anyone who wants to share on items they supported that ranked low, as to why they think them important. 4) Continue discussion until all have had ample opportunity to share, and adjust the process as needed. 5) conduct the ranking exercise again if it seems warranted, or ask if the group is comfortable accepting the decision(s).

**Replacing a Collaborating Entity**

In the event a Collaborating Entity leaves or disbands before the end of the grant term, and assuming funding is available, new partners will be invited or may request to participate. The following considerations and procedures will be implemented:

* Notice and justification will be shared with EPA with request for approval by an authorized EPA official pursuant to CFR 200.308I(2) and / I(c)(6) prior to any other actions.
* TreePeople will meet with Collaborating Entities to discuss this change and determine if there is interest from one or more Entities to take on additional responsibilities. Discussion with Collaborating Entities will include what is needed in expertise, experience, knowledge, and qualifications for a Statutory Partner replacement to ensure successful grant completion within 3 years.
* If no Collaborating Entity expresses interest, TreePeople will seek candidates through a Request for Qualifications, and share these results with the Collaborating Entities prior to making a final decision.
* Once a decision has been made, the Collaborating Entity will enter into a subaward appropriate to their role that complies with the subaward requirements in the grant regulations at 2 CFR 200.331 and in EPA’s Subaward Policy.
* During the replacement process, TreePeople will assume all management, facilitation and logistics that would have been taken on by the Collaborating Entity in order to maintain the work schedule and assure completion of the grant program within the 3 year timeframe.

*End of Community Engagement and Collaborative Governance Plan*