Unique identifier
LA: Developers versus River Activists

Voice Over
On the other side of the river, near Taylor Yard in the Latino community of Glassu Park, river activists have been building an alliance with community residents, local leaders and the Anawuak Soccer Club to prevent Taylor Yard becoming one huge industrial park.

Melanie Winter, The River Project
The community surrounding Taylor Yard have very, very little park space and in Los Angeles that's saying something, I mean if you have, if you're close to the bottom of the barrel in Los Angeles, and Los Angeles is the bottom of the barrel for major cities in America, then that pretty much paints a really bleak and real picture of where we're at.

Clip
Kids playing football.

Voice Over
The possibility of kids getting more football pitches. What motivates families here is to support the goals of river activists.

Sandra Lopez, LA Resident
(Subtitles) This is the best, this is the best we can do for the children, in order to keep them away from the drugs and the gangs.

Voice Over
It may look like a half-decent football pitch but in a community with lots of kids, and where football is an obsession, waiting time can be months to get onto a pitch. River activists have come up with a mixed use master plan for Taylor Yard which includes room for local businesses, more football fields, and a variety of schemes to help bring a dead river back to life, including an alternative approach to flood protection, and habitat restoration.

Melanie Winter, The River Project
We did this mock-up here to show the community what you could put on forty acres, you know three full size soccer fields, a couple of big softball fields, basketball, tennis, children's recreation areas.

Voice Over
Some habitat is already making an unplanned comeback. In this section of the river near Taylor Yard engineers failed to install a cement bottom because of groundwater conditions. River activists say this is what a lot more of the LA River can look like.

Melanie Winter, The River Project
We're in the riverbed in Ledon Valley, this is a sort of an island in the middle of the river, a little sandbar, waters to the left of me right now; in a flow, this will all be inundated; we've got invasive Exotica Rundo there, we've got a great native Riparian Sycamore over here; it's a pretty mixed bag here.

Voice Over
A soft river bottom is also more absorbent. Soft-bottomed catch basins, like the one being proposed for Taylor Yard, would help slow down the river flow at flood stage, create areas where river habitat can flourish year-round, and provide an area for rainwater to percolate

down into the aquifer, providing LA with valuable drinking water in the future. But developers with an eye on Taylor Yard aren't buying into the alternative visions.

Melanie Winter, The River Project
We spoke with the developer and we showed them what could be done. They wanted us to do the map differently, as they kept saying.

Voice Over
Yet another motive for river activists who oppose large-scale development on these last vast open spaces of LA is that more development brings more asphalt and concrete, increasing rainwater run-off into the flood channels. The river, which appears to be in a coma most of the year, looked like this after a winter storm. An ever-increasing volume of urban run-off is pushing the flood channels beyond their capacity, and helping to create the conditions for deadly floods.

Mike Davis, Writer
One of the engineers I talked to one time from the Army Corps said he thought the ideal solution was to move the entire population out for a month and cluster bomb LA, just put holes in all the concrete, it would radically increase surface absorption and we'd get rid of the storm drain problem. But the truth is you don't need to lay millions more square feet of concrete and asphalt.

Voice Over
So if you're serious about reducing flood hazards, you should be serious about controlling development. And there's another unique feature of the cement channels.

Man (Lewis MacAdams?)
I like to come down here to play my horn for a while. Nice acoustics over here on the bridge, off the cement. (Plays horn)

Voice Over
The channels can be complimented on their acoustics, but when it rains in the semi-arid climate where water is precious, they're perversely efficient at moving billions of litres of potential drinking water from the mountains directly into the Pacific Ocean. All things considered, river activists argue that the cement channels are a 20th century solution which doesn't meet the environmental needs of the 21st century.

Patt Morrison, LA Times
My sense of the Army Corps of engineers, of the way they've thrown themselves into this river project over seven decades, is that they never met a barrel of concrete they didn't like.