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Carson, LA County seeking Dominguez Channel restoration study



The release of millions of gallons of untreated sewage into the Dominguez Channel in Carson has forced the closures of some beaches. Photo taken on Dec. 31, 2021. (Photo by Dean Musgrove, Los Angeles Daily News/SCNG)

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Carson and Los Angeles County officials are weighing long-term options to rehab the Dominguez Channel in the wake of an odor incident that made residents from the South Bay to Long Beach miserable for months.

Those two agencies have requested federal money to conduct a feasibility study to see what could be done to transform the channel from an eyesore to a community asset, potentially even restoring the waterway to its natural habitat. Though the concept is still in its infancy, any such effort would prove a silver lining of sorts following the odor incident, which temporarily displaced many of those who lived closest to the stench's origin.

"It wasn't until the odor event that we even noticed the Dominguez Channel," Carson Public Works Director Eliza Jane Whitman said in a Wednesday, April 20, interview. "To me, Dominguez Channel should become an asset, and it would be great if the community could see it as a place they want to congregate."

For now, though, the Dominguez Channel is the site of rancid memories for many.

The putrid aroma began after a large fire broke out on a warehouse property in Carson in late September. The blaze, which took several days to extinguish, resulted in chemicals contained in the stored products, including ethanol, passing through the sewer system into the Dominguez Channel, a local flood control waterway.

At the same time, according to officials with the region's air quality watchdog, organic materials in the channel began to anaerobically decay. Combined, those circumstances caused elevated levels of hydrogen sulfide to emanate from the channel — leading to the rotten egg smell that plagued locals.

LA County reported in December that its stench-stopping measures worked and reported that levels of the smell had returned to pre-incident levels.

But despite the odor's resolution, officials are looking for ways to turn the Dominguez Channel into something more attractive and engaging for the community.

Those rehab options, as it stands, are relatively unknown to Carson and its partner, the Los Angeles County Department of Public Works.



“The purpose is to get our name on the list, so that when there are funds available, they hopefully will choose us,” Whitman said. “Right now, there’s no study. But we want to do one.”

A feasibility study, Whitman said, would essentially provide an outline for various channel restoration scenarios. That will help the city and county determine what is possible — and at what price point.

The channel’s watershed extends 133 square miles throughout Los Angeles County. It passes through several local jurisdictions, including Carson, Torrance, Long Beach and El Segundo.

“We really want to look at everything to understand what’s feasible,” Whitman said. “We’ve heard crazy amounts of money — some low and some high. We’re doing this to figure out what is real.”

Potential rehabilitation options include restoring the channel back to its original habitat and returning some of the native life to the area, Whitman said.

“Carson used to be wetlands,” she said. “So bringing part of it back — even if it’s just the Dominguez Channel — in a nice way, to me that’s huge.”

Restoring the channel to its natural habitat, Whitman said, would provide an opportunity for the community to learn about and engage with nature.

And if the channel were restored, Whitman said, the city could install bike or walking paths to draw visitors.

But the time frame on funding for a feasibility study is unknown, Whitman said. And without that study, the full scope of a potential rehab is also unknown.

In the meantime, Carson’s Public Works Department is conducting research and interviewing other watershed managers to figure out what information is already available.

“It’s not like we’re just sitting on our hands,” Whitman said.

Whitman is also preparing an outreach strategy to determine the needs of Carson’s local communities and businesses as it relates to the Dominguez Channel, she said, and what it could become. That’ll be presented to the City Council in June, she said.

