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Blowback

Economic stimulus doesn't have to mean ecological disaster

Jump-starting old construction projects to create jobs would harm more than help us. We need to focus on 'smart green' infrastructure.

By Andy Lipkis

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In his Nov. 24 Op-Ed article, "[Depression-era projects, again](#)," Bill Boyarsky outlines some good reasons for Los Angeles residents to support President-elect Barack Obama's plan to spend hundreds of billions of dollars on infrastructure projects. We need the employment, and our city needs rebuilding. It's true that the "New New Deal" offers a fantastic opportunity to rebuild for the future, but this opportunity also contains real dangers. If we don't make careful choices about what kind of infrastructure we build, we will be hardening in concrete the ecological mistakes of our past.

Listening closely to the conversation about the projects that are on the table, you soon realize that many have been waiting on the shelf for years. They are old. The problem with old projects is they often reflect a paradigm that is more than 100 years old. They inadvertently waste resources and pollute, leaving huge downstream costs in public health and national security.

Here's one example of the old paradigm: the Los Angeles River. To solve a flooding problem, we built one of the largest concrete ditches in the world to route the river to the sea as rapidly as possible. This project currently costs us billions of dollars in water that now needs to be pumped to L.A. from hundreds of miles away. The rain that actually falls here naturally gets shunted away from productive use, resulting in the need for enormous end-of-the-pipe sewage treatment plants and leaving the city vulnerable to drought.

We can do much better. We can invest in a new kind of projects -- "smart green" as opposed to old, gray infrastructure. The former uses an emerging set of technologies based on natural processes that provide multiple bangs for our buck. It provides essential city services while at the same time mitigating climate change and helping us adapt to its consequences, supplying us with sustainable energy, water and green-collar jobs. Being smart and green means working with nature, enhancing its ability to capture, clean and store the water we need, filter the air, reduce waste hauling and make our neighborhoods more livable and beautiful.

Sound impossible? It isn't. In fact, it's the job description of the smartest of green infrastructures -- a forest. Studies by local engineers and economists along with demonstration projects have shown the practicality and smart economics of bringing functioning forests back into our city.

This means incorporating elements of the forest in numerous ways, such as building parking groves instead of parking lots so that leafy tree canopies filter pollutants and cool the air. It means reclaiming paved expanses with permeable surfaces and California-friendly planted landscapes that allow us to collect rainwater more easily. And it means using basic technology, such as cisterns under public parks and parking lots -- even in backyards -- to mimic a tree's ability to collect and hold water. An investment in smart green infrastructure also means thousands of long-term jobs as people are needed to manage these systems.

There is nothing theoretical about smart green infrastructure. In L.A. and in a few other places across the country, such projects have already cleared environmental review and could be fast-tracked if the funding arrives. The [Sun Valley Watershed](#) is an impressive example of the new approach. The county's Department of Public Works chose a green alternative to a \$42-million concrete drain to solve a chronic flooding problem in Sun Valley. Although the watershed will cost \$200 million to build -- far more than the original price tag -- the multipurpose project will return \$300 million in benefits and savings in recaptured water, cleaner air and reduced waste hauling. And that's not even including the value of the new jobs it will generate.

Even more exciting, the city of Los Angeles is beginning to change the way it thinks about its water future. Just over a year ago, L.A. completed its first ever Integrated Resource Program plan for water. In doing so, the city found that smart green infrastructure could eliminate the need for a \$4-billion sewage treatment plant, with even more savings as the plan is implemented throughout L.A.

In the rush to fund job-creating projects, there are calls to abandon environmental reviews because they would delay construction. This is a critical mistake as it squanders a once-in-a-generation opportunity to make lasting change and positively address L.A.'s many environmental needs. The choice is clear. We can choose innovative smart green projects that solve multiple problems or embrace old approaches that have the potential to compound the problems we already have. If we have the wisdom to work with nature instead of against it, we can begin to grow a truly sustainable Los Angeles.

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