
The Los Angeles River (courtesy Los Angeles Times)

A few years ago, I heard Bruce Babbitt here at UCLA describe the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers as "just a terrible agency." Then he repeated it, just to make sure that we all heard him. When a politician does something like that, you know that he's reached the end of his rope.

The Los Angeles Times suggests that the Corps is at it again. Los Angeles Mayor Eric Garcetti is in Washington DC attempting to get the Army to approve a $1 billion restoration of the Los Angeles River, but the Corps is resisting, seeking a less ambitious $453 million alternative.

California Senator Barbara Boxer, who just happens to chair the Senate's Environment and Public Works Committee, is strongly behind Garcetti, and the mayor has offered city funds to help get to the $1 billion mark. And *still* the Corps is balking. That's a dysfunctional agency for you.

Now, there is one massive caveat, which tells us a whole lot about the state of journalism today: aside from the cost figure, the *Times'* piece never bothers to tell us precisely what is the difference between the two plans. In the same way that it is silly to say that one plan is better because it is less expensive, it seems worse simply to favor the other plan because it is *more* expensive. **(Attention Times' Editors: I know that this is hard, but could you just *consider* putting some policy substance in your articles? You know, just for fun?)**.

But the issue seems to be whether the River is just going to be updated somewhat for flood control, or whether it will be used for recreational and conservation purposes — two policy goals that the Corps has exhibited virtually no interest in during the past. As Garcetti noted, "I don't think that kids who are growing up in disadvantaged neighborhoods along the L.A. River should be punished for the price of real estate in Los Angeles simply because it's cheaper to do water projects in Wichita….It's an issue of environmental justice."'

The article notes that the Corps appears to have a backlog of flood control and water projects, and quotes someone from a group called Taxpayers for Common Sense — a group that appears to have no local knowledge of Los Angeles — that locals should split the cost for big projects with Washington, ignoring that this

appears to be exactly what Garcetti is proposing (although in fairness, who knows if the *Times* reporter bothered to tell him). Moreover, says the spokesman, 'If they do this for L.A., why wouldn't they do it for everybody?'

Fortunately enough, there's an answer! And it comes from the "intellectual" leader of the Republican Party, Congressmember Paul Ryan. Ryan, you recall, argued that federal spending was bad not just for the John Galts of the world who fearlessly create value; it was also bad for the 47% of the population — the "Takers" — because "we don't want to turn the safety net into a hammock that lulls able-bodied people into complacency and dependence."

I think that that's perfect. If federal spending threatens to become a hammock for Congressmember Ryan's constituents in Wisconsin, those of us here in Los Angeles are made of sterner stuff. So it's really quite simple: take all of the money from Republican districts for various federal projects, save conservatives from the hammock, and give to the hard-working folks in Los Angeles. Deal?