

# What Would You Like to Say Yes To?

*Seven minutes by air, an hour on foot, and a city still being invented*

*On gondolas, kite festivals, a river being reclaimed, and what Los Angeles could become.*

I am going to start with the feeling, because the feeling is the point.

The first time I rode an aerial tram as a child — The Brackenridge Park Skyride at the San Antonio Zoo, the memory blurs across all the times that followed — I understood something about cities that I hadn't known before. From a slowly swaying cabin a hundred feet up in the air, the thing you see is not what you expected. You expected more of the same thing, just from higher. What you actually see is the structure underneath: the way streets connect, the way neighborhoods relate, the way a city's logic becomes legible from outside it. And then there is the silence. The ordinary noise of the world drops away, and you are floating above something simultaneously familiar and entirely new. I went looking for that feeling for the rest of my life: ski resorts, cable cars, a gondola over Singapore harbor in 1995 that I still remember with uncomplicated joy. Every time, the sensation was the same. Every time, someone nearby — a child usually, but not always — was grinning at the window as they had just discovered something new.

As an adult, I rode the Metrocable in Medellín, Colombia, and understood for the first time what a gondola could mean to a city that actually needed one.

Medellín had built its metro through the valley floor — efficient, well-designed, useful to everyone it could reach. But the city's hillside comunas, where some of its most isolated and underserved communities lived, were separated from the metro by gradients too steep for buses to climb reliably. The commute from the comunas to the city center took two hours each way. The gondola, installed in 2004, cut that to thirty minutes. It didn't just move people faster. It made the city legible in both directions: the comunas became accessible to the city; the city became accessible to the comunas. Investment followed the gondola uphill — libraries, parks, escalators, more transit lines. La Paz, Bolivia built its first gondola in 2014 and now operates eleven. The lesson isn't that gondolas are magic. The lesson is that connecting isolated communities to the center of a city changes what is possible for the people who live there. And the view, it turns out, is worth something too. Those Medellín riders don't just commute. They look out the window. They see where they live from the outside. It is beautiful.

I live on College Street in Chinatown, Los Angeles, less than a quarter mile from the eastern edge of the Los Angeles State Historic Park. I moved here because I love this neighborhood — its density, its layered history, its position at the intersection of the city's most storied corridors. And for years now, I have been watching a gondola proposal for this neighborhood be debated, protested, celebrated, and debated again.

Stand on Radio Hill on a clear evening and try to hold what this corridor contains in your mind at once.

Below you: the former Southern Pacific rail yards, now 32 acres of park and open sky where tens of thousands of immigrants first touched Los Angeles ground. To the south: Union Station, the last great train station built in America, and the future terminus of California High-Speed Rail — service projected under the most ambitious scenario for approximately 2040, which will transform this station from a regional hub into a statewide gateway. Ahead and uphill: the lights of Dodger Stadium and the approximately 260 acres of surface parking surrounding it, sitting on land from which three Mexican-American neighborhoods were forcibly cleared in the early 1950s for a stadium the Dodgers received, essentially, for free. And to the east, catching the last of the light: the Los Angeles River, running its channelized course through the city, is being reclaimed inch by inch by the people who live near it into something approaching a living greenway. Beyond all of it: Elysian Park, the oldest park in Los Angeles, and the informal footpaths of Solano Canyon, Elysian Heights, Victor Heights — communities stitched together by trails no agency has yet bothered to make official.

This is what the proposed Los Angeles Aerial Rapid Transit gondola would pass over. This is what a planning amendment is actually about.

The LAART proposal would carry passengers from Union Station to Dodger Stadium in seven minutes aboard a zero-emissions aerial gondola, passing over LASHP and the neighborhoods of Chinatown and Solano Canyon. It would operate 365 days a year, remove an estimated 3,000 cars on game days, and cost stadium-goers nothing to ride. It would be the first aerial transit system in LA County.

Critics call it a stadium toy. A novelty dressed up as transit. A Trojan horse for gentrification in a neighborhood that has already given enough. And the opposition has been fierce enough that it produced, somewhat improbably, one of the most beloved new civic rituals in the city: the Clockshop Kite Festival, organized in protest of the gondola, now in its fifth year. Hundreds of kites above the Cornfield. Families from across Los Angeles share a sky in a park that almost became a warehouse. The kite festival is genuinely magical, and it would probably not exist if the gondola proposal had never been made. If that is the first gift of the gondola to this city, it tells you something important about this park and this community: they tend to produce beauty even from conflict. The question is whether we can get to that beauty without requiring years of protest first.

| *Instead of saying no to the gondola — what would we all like to say yes to?*

The opposition's concerns deserve a rigorous answer. Old Chinatown was demolished in 1938 to build Union Station. Palo Verde, La Loma, and Bishop — three thriving Mexican-American neighborhoods — were cleared from Chavez Ravine in the early 1950s for public housing that was never built, and the land was eventually handed to the Dodgers. These are not ancient grievances. They are living memory, carried by families who still live here, and who have learned through hard experience that infrastructure in this corridor tends to benefit those passing through more than those who live here.

But the argument that infrastructure causes displacement is backwards. Displacement is caused by the failure to build anti-displacement policy alongside infrastructure. The gondola, structured correctly, is not a gentrification engine. It is a funding mechanism — one that can capitalize a community benefits agreement with enforceable anti-displacement commitments, a neighborhood stabilization fund, affordable housing preservation, and free fares for residents of William Mead Homes. Transit-oriented displacement is a political choice, not a natural law. The community has moved from asking whether the gondola should exist to asking what it must deliver. That is the more productive question, and it is the one that leads somewhere good.

Here is what I want the gondola to say yes to.

**A walk worth taking.** Imagine arriving at Union Station — by Metro, by Metrolink, or by the high-speed train from San Francisco that will pull in here around 2040 — and choosing to walk to Dodger Stadium rather than ride. Today, that walk is a navigational ordeal through unmarked streets and a neighborhood that has been systematically underinvested. It does not have to be. The LAART corridor traces one of the most historically and ecologically rich urban transects in the American West. A dedicated pedestrian route from Union Station through Chinatown — past the shops of Hill Street and Broadway, past murals and history markers — through LASHP and its Zanja Madre remnant, up to Radio Hill, across to Dodger Stadium: this is not a fantasy. The topography is there. The desire is there. The gondola’s community benefits agreement should fund it. The gondola should be the express option. The walk should be worth taking.

**Radio Hill as a destination.** The chaparral ridge visible from the gondola’s midpoint has long been envisioned as a future botanical garden and outdoor amphitheatre — a native plant garden, butterfly sanctuary, and performance space in the hills above Chinatown, accessible from the walking corridor and the urban trail, programmable by the community institutions that have built their work around this park for two decades: Clockshop, Metabolic Studio, the Chinatown arts community. Public art belongs up there. So does a summer concert series, a school field-trip program, a native plant nursery. LAART’s community benefit fund should make the Radio Hill Botanical Gardens & Amphitheatre a named, funded destination — the crown of the pedestrian corridor that the gondola anchors.

**A river connection.** Los Angeles State Historic Park sits at a remarkable convergence: a north-south trail running from Union Station toward Griffith Park, and the Los Angeles River running east-west along the park’s eastern edge. The River is one of the great reclamation stories in American urbanism — once dismissed as a concrete flood channel, now being slowly restored by Friends of the Los Angeles River and allied organizations into something approaching a living greenway. The urban hiking trail and the gondola’s community benefits must include an explicit east-west connection from the park to the LA River Greenway. The vision, fully realized: a connected green network from the River through LASHP, up Radio Hill, through Elysian Park, to Griffith Park and beyond — a green spine through the heart of the city, funded by the gondola that flies above it.

*LASHP sits at the natural junction of the north-south trail corridor and the Los Angeles River. A pedestrian connection from the park to the River Greenway would link two networks that, together, extend for miles through the city.*

**An urban hiking trail.** The gondola corridor traces the most promising alignment for a transformational regional trail: Union Station → Chinatown → LASHP → Radio Hill → Elysian Park → the old Pacific Electric Red Car alignment along the western edge of the I-5 Freeway → Griffith Park. This trail is not a new idea; it traces movement patterns that predate the freeway, the stadium, and the rail yard. Making it official — maintained surfaces, wayfinding, shade, water — would create a continuous green spine connecting communities severed from each other for sixty years. The gondola should fund it.

**The pedestrian bridge that should already exist.** Between LASHP's northern edge and the neighborhoods of Solano Canyon and Broadway, a Metro A Line rail corridor runs with no pedestrian crossing for a significant stretch. This gap — modest in engineering terms, enormous in daily lived impact — has been a community aspiration for years. It completes the network: park to neighborhood, trail to river, gondola station to the residential streets east of the tracks. It should be a required deliverable of LAART, with construction milestones in the conditions of approval.

**The conversation about 260 acres.** The surface parking surrounding Dodger Stadium — approximately 260 acres, held by a joint venture between Guggenheim Baseball Management and Frank McCourt — will not be parking forever. When enough people arrive without cars, by gondola, by Metro, eventually by high-speed rail from San Francisco, the economic case for 16,000 surface spaces weakens. The case for something else grows. My own vision: an expansion of Elysian Park, pushing native habitat and recreational programming into cleared acres; tennis courts and soccer fields; and, over the longer arc, a complete mixed-income community on land taken from a community and returned to one. Others will have different visions. The gondola's community benefit fund should pay for the process of imagining them together — a community-led 100-year plan for those 260 acres, beginning within three years of gondola operations.

**A Union Station designed for what comes next.** California High-Speed Rail's arrival at Union Station around 2040 will transform it into a statewide gateway. LAART is, potentially, the first and last-mile connection for one of the most consequential public investments in California history. That integration must be designed now, while both projects are still in planning. LAART's Union Station connection must be designed with HSR wayfinding, proximity, and operational coordination built in from the start. This is the difference between a gondola that is a great transit investment and one that is a historic one.

There is something worth saying about this park and what it means for this debate.

Los Angeles State Historic Park was saved from warehousing by people who refused to accept a narrow vision for one of the most historically significant parcels in the West. Lewis MacAdams, Lauren Bon, Chi Mui, Sean Woods — they fought for something larger, and they won. The park now stands as proof that civic imagination, sustained over two decades, can transform a brownfield into a place of beauty and shared meaning. And when the gondola was proposed over

that park, the opposition organized a kite festival. One of the most joyful events in the city came from a dispute. That is what this community does.

The question is not whether a gondola connecting Union Station to Dodger Stadium is a good or bad thing in the abstract. The question is whether Los Angeles is capable of building infrastructure with enough creativity, community accountability, and long-range vision that it becomes, over time, a genuine gift to the people who live here — the way the park has been. And whether the people who live here are willing to fight not just against the things they fear, but for the things they love.

I have sat in gondola cabins on four continents and watched the city fall away below and felt — every time — the particular grace of being lifted above the ordinary and shown what is possible. I want that for my neighbors on College Street. I want it for the families of William Mead Homes. I want it for the child who will ride this gondola for the first time, look out the window, and see Los Angeles from the outside and understand, maybe for the first time, that it is beautiful.

Seven minutes by air is the promise. An hour on foot, through a corridor worth walking, past a Radio Hill worth climbing, alongside a river being reclaimed, toward a park that is still being invented — that is the city worth building.

What would you like to say yes to?

*— Will Wright is a resident of Chinatown, Los Angeles.*