

## Friends of the Los Angeles River Restores Habitat with Sage Fundraising 50

Once upon a time, the Los Angeles River meandered through wetlands, marshes, willow stands, and sycamore glades, and was home to steelhead trout and grizzlies. Today the river runs through 14 cities and countless neighborhoods, and 80 percent of it is paved. With the cement came a perceptual shift: the river became merely a “flood control channel,” surrounded by fences and signs.

Friends of the Los Angeles River (FoLAR) aims to change that. The 501(c) 3 nonprofit organization was founded in 1986 to restore the river. Its dream is a greenway stretching from the mountains to the sea, with 52 miles of parks, bike paths, gathering places and wildlife habitat—a waterfront park running from Canoga Park to the Queen Mary in Long Beach.

### Evolving Needs

For many years, FoLAR used customer relations software to manage its operations—modifying the database to accommodate its contacts. But as the group achieved critical mass, it needed a more dedicated tool—a comprehensive fundraising solution.

“Our previous software made it difficult to perform sorts or extract data,” says Shelly Backlar, executive director. “Reporting options were limited, and it required a lot of persistence to categorize contacts into groups.”

### Smooth Waters with Sage Fundraising 50

The former development director had conducted extensive research on nonprofit software at her previous organization, and recommended Sage Fundraising 50. “Our wish list included affordability, flexibility, and the ability to grow with us,” notes Backlar. “Sage Fundraising 50 met all of our criteria.”

FoLAR has been using Sage Fundraising 50 since 2004 to manage all areas of fundraising operations. “We rely on the software for everything, from entering potential prospects to organizing a focused membership campaign. It is our main database, allowing us to do normal recordkeeping, data mining, and research on both individual and corporate foundation donors, as well as managing information on our volunteers,” explains Backlar.



### CUSTOMER

**Friends of the Los Angeles River**

### INDUSTRY

Nonprofit, Environmental

### LOCATION

Los Angeles, California

**Number of Locations:** One

**Number of Employees:** Three

### SYSTEM

Sage Fundraising 50

### Challenge

Existing database software was cumbersome, offered limited reporting functions, and made it difficult to generate mailings.

### Solution

Sage Fundraising 50 has automated all core fundraising tactics and outreach programs.

### Results

Mailings that took several days can now be done in little over an hour; steps required for database sorts reduced from four to one.

## Streamlining Typical Tasks

Any time FoLAR wants to send out a mailing, it selects criteria in Sage Fundraising 50 and runs a list for the mailing house. This used to take several days. With Sage Fundraising 50, the job can be done in a little over an hour.

Sage Fundraising 50 helps Backlar create a wide variety of reports for running the organization. “We can split out our active donors from those that we’re cultivating,” she explains. “We can also break down donors by giving level and frequency, separate individual from corporate donors, and perform data mining. This is essential information when we send out appeals and plan our membership campaign each year.”

## Easier Event Planning

Organizing events like the annual awards dinner used to be a chore. Creating invitation lists and sub lists required four steps. “Sage Fundraising 50 does the work for us now,” explains Backlar, “streamlining our process down to a single step. It makes us much more efficient.”

FoLAR uses Sage Fundraising 50 to publicize its annual Los Angeles River Cleanup. “We try to mobilize the entire community and get people down to the river, so they’ll become invested in our cause,” says Backlar. “This year we had 3,200 people. They picked up 25 tons of trash from 15 sites in just three hours. Sage Fundraising 50 helped us get out announcements quickly, and contributed to our great turnout.”

The Sage Fundraising 50 contact list comes into play when FoLAR plans its annual dinner. More than 400 people attend the gala event, which is held in a beautiful courtyard and features drinks, food and music. The dinner honors the year’s “Rivie Award” winners—people who have done the most for the river during the year. Since corporate sponsors underwrite a good portion of the event, Sage Fundraising 50 plays an important role in locating donors and coordinating contributions.

## Efficient e-Newsletters

FoLAR turned to Sage Fundraising 50 when it wanted to ramp up electronic communications with its constituents. “We tried e-mailing newsletters and news flashes with our old system, but it couldn’t group data the way we needed. Also, we got a lot of bounced-back messages because of incorrect addresses,” says Backlar.

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—Shelley Backlar  
Executive Director  
Friends of the Los Angeles River

“Sage Fundraising 50, on the other hand, makes the project a breeze. Our e-newsletter template interfaces seamlessly with Sage Fundraising 50, which stores and exports email addresses. We communicate with our contact base quickly and easily, sending out updates as needed. Also, because Sage Fundraising 50 requires that data only be entered once, we have more accurate e-mail addresses and fewer errors,” she continues.

Backlar says that she is now more confident about the organization’s future. “I feel really good about having Sage Fundraising 50 as our primary tool,” she says. “As we embark on new membership campaigns and other ambitious programs, we have the infrastructure necessary for success.”