

Friends of the Whittier Narrows Natural Area
Campaign to save Whittier Narrows Natural Area

P.O. Box 3522
South El Monte CA 91733
<http://naturalareafriends.net>
info@naturalareafriends.net
(323) 227-1822

Media backgrounder

Whittier Narrows Natural Area and the San Gabriel River Discovery Center

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A coalition of municipal water districts and state and county government agencies is proposing the construction of an 18,230-square-foot \$27-million taxpayer-funded science museum on the Whittier Narrows Natural Area, a 70-year-old 419-acre wildlife sanctuary on the San Gabriel River between the Montebello and Puente Hills.

The San Gabriel River Discovery Center, as the project is called, is the first of two related stages of development that would destroy critical wildlife habitat, rob our diverse communities of open space, and shift the focus away from firsthand experiences of nature. And it would do so using public dollars to take public lands for a project the goals of which could be better served through less destructive and less costly means.

The Friends of the Whittier Narrows Natural Area believes that the discovery center proposal, in its current form, fails to meet the multiple needs of our communities and our children, fails to provide appropriate stewardship of public resources, and fails in the obligations to preserve and to restore open space and wildlife habitat.

Discovery center 'incompatible' with Significant Ecological Area

The discovery center is only the first part of a two-part plan that would affect more than 40 acres of the Whittier Narrows Natural Area, part of the larger Whittier Narrows Significant Ecological Area (SEA). The discovery center would replace the small human footprint of the current 1,200-square-foot nature center and 40-car parking lot with a football-field-length building nearly three times the size of Pasadena's Eaton Canyon Nature Center, a 150-car parking lot, an artificial wetland and additional manmade support structures. The impact of the discovery center would be the destruction of acres of existing plant and wildlife habitat.

On May 5, 2008, the Significant Ecological Area Technical Advisory Committee (SEATAC), a committee of scientists that advises the Los Angeles County Planning Department on the management of its SEAs, refused to endorse the discovery center as appropriate development in the Whittier Narrows SEA, saying that the project was 'incompatible' with the committee's mandate.

The committee questioned the proposal on a number of grounds, including the size of the project and the failure to look adequately at alternative locations. The committee also noted about the proposal that "there is an irony in ripping out nature to make it available." The committee's rejection of the discovery center is even more significant when weighed against the facts that its mandate does not exclude development in SEAs and that the discovery center has been marketed as a green project.

The Whittier Narrows Natural Area offers important habitat for plants, birds and land-dwelling animals. It also forms part of larger ecologically significant regions that environmental organizations say must be protected.

The Audubon Society includes Whittier Narrows in its "Los Angeles Flood Control Basins" Important Bird Area. Within this IBA, the Natural Area helps to provide habitat for more than 300 bird species, many threatened, endangered or of special concern.

The Natural Area also helps to provide a wildlife corridor for land animals such as coyote and bobcat. It helps to connect the San Gabriel Mountains, the Montebello Hills and the Puente-Chino Hills Wildlife Corridor. The Sierra Club calls the Puente-Chino Hills corridor a nearly 31-mile unbroken chain of plant and wildlife habitat extending to the Cleveland National Forest in Orange County. Like the Natural Area, the Montebello Hills and the Puente-Chino Hills Wildlife Corridor are facing threats from development.

Finally, the Natural Area and Whittier Narrows provide one of only two remaining rare Coastal Alluvial Fan Sage Scrub plant communities on the San Gabriel River. According to the San Gabriel Mountains Regional Conservancy, "Rare and endangered plants, birds, and other wildlife species inhabit these unusual habitat areas."

A number of local and regional environmental organizations are concerned that the forthcoming draft environmental impact report will be an inadequate tool for looking at the impact of planned development on the Natural Area. The draft EIR will look only at the discovery center proposal and exclude the Lario Creek Enhancement Project, a 36-acre project that is the second stage of the development vision for the discovery center.

Loss of open space and its impact on the community

The inescapable fact of the discovery center/Lario creek project is a net loss of open space in a largely working-class, immigrant and minority area of Los Angeles County. This would occur at a time when the growing risks to underserved children from inactivity and from lack of access to outdoor recreation are becoming acute.

A 2005 study by the UCLA Center for Health Policy Research and the Latino Coalition for a Healthy California found that “More than one out of three Latino adolescents in California are overweight or at risk for overweight.” “Overweight adolescents,” UCLA researchers noted, “are at increased risk for becoming obese adults and for developing chronic, serious and costly medical problems, such as diabetes, heart disease and certain cancers.” With such threats facing our diverse communities, the priority should be the preservation and restoration of open space, rather than the sacrifice of portions of the Natural Area to a project that could irrevocably shift the focus toward indoor activities and away from nature and the outdoors.

Such a shift would be the result of the priorities set by the joint powers authority behind the project, the San Gabriel River Discovery Center Authority (DCA). In its 2008 project strategic plan, the DCA makes clear that the discovery center takes priority over the Natural Area while leaving responsibility for preservation and restoration of much of the Natural Area to other agencies. The document states: “As non-Discovery Center portions of WNNA are rehabilitated by other agencies in the future, [the Discovery Center will] work collaboratively *to advocate for changes that are harmonious with the Discovery Center concept, site program and design.*”

As we shift away from outdoor experiences in our communities, we risk losing not only the benefits that nature and open space provide directly to people, but also the foundation of much of the environmental movement as well. The children of the diverse communities around Whittier Narrows will have less opportunity to interact with the natural world and may end up less inclined to advocate for wise environmental policies and practices. As biologist Robert Michael Pyle has written: “What is the extinction of the condor to a child who has never seen a wren?”

‘With stunningly little accountability to the voters’

Recent Southern California history shows that if the San Gabriel River Discovery Center is built, taxpayers could be left to pay most of the bill on a project developed with little public input, decided largely by political appointees and career bureaucrats, and which, even after the investment of tens of millions of dollars, might never open its doors.

At least three of the five members of the Discovery Center Authority board are political appointees or career civil servants. They do not answer to the public through the electoral process, yet they wield incredible influence over the disposition of public lands and public dollars. State and county agencies and two municipal water districts already have spent or have committed nearly \$10 million in taxpayer money. For those people living in areas served by the Upper San Gabriel Valley or Central Basin municipal water districts, this means they are being triple billed for construction of the discovery center—once through state taxes, once through county taxes and once through their water bills.

One of the major funders of the discovery center project is the San Gabriel and Lower Los Angeles Rivers and Mountains Conservancy (RMC). The project has received \$3 million (drawn from bond money that must be repaid by Californians) from the state

agency, which was established “to provide open space, low-impact recreational and educational uses, water conservation, watershed improvement, wildlife and habitat restoration and protection, and watershed improvement within the territory.”

The *Claremont Insider* local politics blog, on Sept. 3, 2008, discussed the discovery center and a now-cancelled RMC grant to Claremont’s Padua Park project, described by one reader “as an active, intensive-use sports park.” The *Insider* concluded:

“Voters thinking that they are protecting nature and open space approve billions of dollars in bonds to generate funds the RMC uses for its grants, and then the money leaks out in drips and drabs under false pretenses to the pet projects of Southern California’s elected and non-elected officials. And they do it all with stunningly little accountability to the voters.”

The discovery center proposal also flies in the face of recent Southern California museum-building history, which exposes the difficult, and possibly fruitless, path such projects follow. In 2007, the Metropolitan Water District cancelled the lease on its \$26-million Center for Water Education in Hemet, Calif. and paid almost \$5 million more to cover debt on the project. It never opened full-time and was closed as of this writing.

In the San Fernando Valley sits another incomplete nature-oriented museum: the Children’s Museum at Hansen Dam Recreation Area. In 2002, the *Los Angeles Times* reported that the president of the museum’s board of trustees blamed a stalled economy for then-delays in development of the museum’s Hansen Dam and downtown Los Angeles sites. Seven years later, the downtown site has yet to be built and the Hansen Dam building sits locked behind a chain-link fence, never having opened.

Good alternatives to a false choice

The current discovery center proposal forces a false choice upon the community. It tells the many minority, underserved communities of the Whittier Narrows area: “You can have open space or you can have education—but you cannot have both.”

Along with the obvious threats posed by the discovery center/Lario creek project, this multi-million-dollar development would create strong pressures for the introduction of fees where today there are none. There are no parking, entrance or school tour fees at the Whittier Narrows Natural Area and nature center. But the construction, maintenance and staffing requirements created by the discovery center and Lario creek would lead almost certainly to fees and would, in a sad irony, create barriers to community access of a resource that is currently available to all.

But as pointed out by SEATAC, the Friends of the Whittier Narrows Natural Area and other community and environmental advocates, there are numerous good alternatives to destroying existing open space and robbing the community and local wildlife of an important habitat, outdoor classroom and accessible community resource.

Alternative 1 – Build on the Duck Farm

Less than a mile up the San Gabriel River and the 605 Freeway from the Natural Area, a 57-acre former duck farm is being rehabilitated and developed as a new park for the region. This piece of land has the added advantage of being located across the small San Jose Creek from the county sanitation districts' water treatment plant. If the discovery center were incorporated into plans for the duck farm and access created to the treatment plant, the agencies behind the discovery center could deliver to students and other visitors an exceptional educational experience that combines a traditional museum visit with a window into the real-world work of watershed management and the delivery of safe, clean water to Southern California communities.

Alternative 2 – Partner to deliver free, mobile water education to schools

The agencies of the Discovery Center Authority *could reach tens of thousands more students than they expect will visit the discovery center* if they were to partner with an existing science museum to deliver free, mobile water education programs to area schools. DCA expects only 24,000 students will visit the discovery center annually, but in fiscal 2008 two Orange County municipal water districts delivered standards-based water education programs to 93,000 students at their schools through a partnership with the Discovery Science Center in Santa Ana, Calif. A third water district has joined the program, and the goal for fiscal 2009 is 110,000 students. Using the Orange County model, the agencies of DCA could partner with a facility such as the California Science Center or the Aquarium of the Pacific to reach their educational goals.

Alternative 3 – Partner with the Aquarium of the Pacific for on-site programs

The DCA agencies could partner with Long Beach's Aquarium of the Pacific and its recently opened permanent watershed exhibit, "Our Watersheds: Pathway to the Pacific." The exhibit explores the subject that underlies the discovery center proposal, and the aquarium sits only 20 miles from Whittier Narrows and is within the 25-mile service area envisioned for the discovery center, meaning that the two watershed exhibits would serve much the same population. This begs the question: "Would the discovery center be little more than a costly redundancy?" Instead of spending tens of millions of dollars on the discovery center, the DCA agencies could, at a fraction of the cost and without the destruction of wildlife habitat and open space, reach the same communities to build awareness and understanding of the San Gabriel River watershed.

Conclusion

Our organization agrees with the educational goals of the discovery center. However, we also believe that nature should not be destroyed in misguided efforts to teach children and the community to value it. Our diverse communities deserve access to natural open space and environmental education and the benefits these provide. The Whittier Narrows Natural Area provides these to all; the discovery center/Lario creek project would diminish them—and our communities in the process.