

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

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## **Millions in tax dollars risked by proposed San Gabriel River museum**

*Two failed SoCal museums that were to focus on science and nature wasted tens of millions in tax dollars. A proposal for Whittier Narrows could waste tens of millions more.*

SOUTH EL MONTE, Calif. (April 13, 2009) — Seemingly paying little heed to mounting evidence that large-scale museum-building projects face possibly insurmountable obstacles and waste millions in tax dollars, the San Gabriel River Discovery Center Authority apparently is pressing forward with its proposal to build a \$27-million, 18,230-square-foot science museum on the Whittier Narrows Natural Area, a wildlife sanctuary between the Montebello and Puente Hills.

The first week of April brought reports in Los Angeles-area media that the never-opened \$52-million Children's Museum of Los Angeles, located at Hansen Dam Recreation Area, is preparing for Chapter 7 bankruptcy and liquidation. The residents of the City of Los Angeles paid most of the development and construction costs for the 57,000-square-foot museum.

The construction costs of another failed project, the Center for Water Education in Hemet, Calif., were paid largely by customers of the Municipal Water District of Southern California. MWD paid \$16 million of the \$26-million construction bill and then paid an additional \$5 million to cover debt on the project when it canceled the lease on the building.

"The Discovery Center Authority is taking a huge risk in pursuing this project," said Jim Odling, chair of the Friends of the Whittier Narrows Natural Area, an organization opposed the current Discovery Center proposal. "The failures of the Children's Museum and the Hemet water museum should be the danger signs telling the DCA to rethink its project before millions in tax dollars are misspent turning wildlife habitat, open space and outdoor learning opportunities into a building that could end up

anything—government offices, new headquarters for water districts, even a vacant eyesore that attracts crime.”

The Daily News reported on April 8 that the Los Angeles City Council was looking for alternative uses for the Children’s Museum building, which “will probably not remain a museum.” The newspaper reported that Councilman Richard Alarcón, whose district includes the building, “said his top priority is to get the building under city control and maintenance before it starts to fall apart,” citing concerns that the building not become “a blight on the community.”

The maintenance and operation costs of both failed museums were to have been borne by nonprofit organizations. However, in both cases it appears that taxpayers and water ratepayers will be responsible for the costs of the alternative uses of the buildings. The San Gabriel River Discovery Center, a decade in development, has yet to break ground and is only about a third of the way to its \$27-million fundraising goal for construction alone. All contributions have come solely from county and state agencies and from two San Gabriel Valley and southeast Los Angeles municipal water districts.

“With the recent sales tax increase and more tax increases on the way in California, the Discovery Center Authority shouldn’t be gambling taxpayer and ratepayer dollars on a big-ticket science museum that might never even open its doors,” Odling said. “Instead, the DCA should commit to improving the current Whittier Narrows Nature Center or to building a much less expensive and much more community-focused interpretive center such as the Audubon Center at Debs Park in Los Angeles or Eaton Canyon Nature Center in Pasadena.”

#### About the Friends of the Whittier Narrows Natural Area

The Friends of the Whittier Narrows Natural Area is an all-volunteer, nonprofit organization dedicated to promoting the preservation of the Whittier Narrows Natural Area and neighboring lands as open space corridors. We promote and assist with restoration and educational uses of the Natural Area that are compatible with the conservation of plant and animal habitat and migration, historical resources, water quality, and public health and safety.