

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

Contact: Jim Odling, (323) 227-1822

P.O. Box 3522
South El Monte CA 91733
<http://naturalareafriends.net>
info@naturalareafriends.net

For immediate release

June 29, 2009

No community support for \$30M Discovery Center at EIR meeting

Project that would demolish existing nature center and destroy wildlife habitat in Whittier Narrows is roundly criticized. Natural Area is 'my Yosemite,' says one speaker.

SOUTH EL MONTE, Calif. (June 29, 2009) — Residents of area communities and supporters of the Whittier Narrows Natural Area strongly criticized and rejected a controversial \$30 million regional watershed visitor center proposed for the county Natural Area during a public meeting held Wednesday at South El Monte High School to discuss the project and its recently released draft environmental impact report.

No member of the community spoke in favor of the proposal during the meeting.

The project, the San Gabriel River Discovery Center, would dramatically increase the human footprint within the only wildlife sanctuary on the San Gabriel River, located between the Montebello and Puente Hills. It would replace the existing 2,000-square-foot nature center with a building nearly 10 times bigger, and it would destroy important wildlife habitat within a county Significant Ecological Area to build a 150-car parking lot and other manmade features.

The project is being pushed by a four-agency joint powers authority, which consists of two municipal water districts, a state conservancy and the county department of parks and recreation.

After a summary of the project and the EIR given by county staff and employees of the firm that prepared the report, 12 individuals spoke during the meeting's public comment period.

Citing a wide-range of concerns, the speakers questioned not only the conclusions drawn by the report and its methodology but many of the assumptions and objectives underlying the discovery center project.

Jessica Olive Nava, of Pico Rivera, said she took exception with the characterization of local residents as underserved and disadvantaged. Rather, Nava said, she felt privileged to live so close to the Natural Area.

“I feel the Natural Area is my Yosemite,” she said. “I have found that it is not only a sanctuary for wildlife but for myself as well as many others.”

Nava and other speakers also expressed concern about the possible loss of existing outdoor education and recreation programs and opportunities.

“I have seen beautiful birds, colorful butterflies, flowers and families having lunch” at the Natural Area, Nava said.

Susan McLean said many school-age children visit the Natural Area, “seeing for the first time what wildlife looks like up close.”

They can “walk on a trail, hear an owl hooting high up in the tree, see a hawk circling in the updraft and, if they are lucky, watch one swoop down from the sky to fetch its next meal,” she said.

Other speakers criticized the proposal on its likely high costs for construction, operation and maintenance; its probable introduction of user fees; and the failure of discovery center member agencies to look at more economical alternatives.

Julio Bermejo, of San Gabriel, said that it was unlikely that member agencies would be able or willing to fully pay the costs of the discovery center as claimed in the EIR and that fees likely would be charged, as they are in other areas of the Whittier Narrows Recreation Area and at some county museums.

“If fees are introduced,” he said, “access will be reduced to the community.”

Henrietta Correa Salazar and Michael Barba, both of Pico Rivera, said existing water education programs in southeast Los Angeles County and in Orange County showed that the discovery center is unnecessary.

Correa Salazar showed colorful inserts from the local daily newspaper that discussed local watersheds and encouraged water conservation. “All they need now is a mobile exhibit, and you’ve got the discovery center,” she said.

Barba said three Orange County and Los Angeles County water agencies are successfully using a mobile water education program to reach tens of thousands of students in their schools.

In FY 2008, two municipal water districts used the program to provide science education to approximately 90,000 students. In FY 2009, the third water company joined the mobile education program, and the goal was increased to 110,000 students.

The discovery center would see a maximum of 25,000 students annually, according to the EIR.

Other speakers said they did not see the sense in building a nature center that would destroy the nature the facility is supposed to interpret and open to the community.

The criticism echoed the views of the county's Significant Ecological Areas Technical Advisory Committee, which said "there is an irony in ripping out nature to make it available."

On May 5, 2008, the committee rejected the discovery center proposal as being "incompatible" with the Whittier Narrows SEA, criticizing the size and location of the project and the apparent failure to consider alternative sites adequately.

Maria Saucedo, of El Monte, told Wednesday's audience and county and Discovery Center Authority staff that she questioned the joint powers authority's commitment to meeting the needs and desires of the community.

She said the community had expressed its opposition to the project on previous occasions, but that it appears to be proceeding in spite of the community's wishes.

"You hear all the public comments: 'Don't do this,' 'Leave it alone,' 'Let it be,'" she said. "Are you really listening to the public, or is it just what the agencies want to do and not hear what the people say who live here?"

The public comment period for the discovery center EIR closes on Aug. 3, 2009.

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. Web site: <http://naturalareafriends.net>