

Friends of the Whittier Narrows Natural Area

Campaign to save Whittier Narrows Natural Area

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For immediate release
July 29, 2009

Veteran environmental lawyer joins opposition to Discovery Center

Attorney for group opposed to controversial \$30M facility proposed for Whittier Narrows speaks at second public hearing where community again rejects Discovery Center.

SOUTH EL MONTE, Calif. (July 29, 2009) — A veteran environmental consultant and attorney has joined the effort to stop development of a controversial watershed education center and conference facility in an eastern Los Angeles County wildlife sanctuary.

Marcia S. Wertenberger, Esq., who has nearly 30 years of experience representing clients ranging from environmental organizations to government agencies, spoke on behalf of the Friends of the Whittier Narrows Natural Area during a public hearing on the San Gabriel River Discovery Center draft environmental impact report at South El Monte High School here on July 18.

The discovery center, a publicly funded \$30 million project planned for the Whittier Narrows Natural Area, would destroy important wildlife habitat, waste scarce public dollars and introduce user fees in a working-class and minority area already hard hit by rising taxes and water rates, critics say.

Wertenberger, whose experience includes guiding federal clients on highly controversial projects involving public lands, military uses and endangered species issues, said after the hearing that the discovery center project “appears to be littered with inaccurate information and assumptions that could easily confuse the public.”

“There even appear to be attempts to keep the public in the dark,” she said.

“I was appalled to learn that the [California Environmental Quality Act] document that contains the analysis of the impacts of the proposed project was not available for review at the nature center that is slated for destruction,” Wertenberger said.

“I am here to ensure that the law is followed under CEQA and [the National Environmental Policy Act] in regard to the proper environmental review and that the goals of the master plan for the San Gabriel River are followed,” she said.

In her comments during the hearing, Wertenberger criticized the decision made by the San Gabriel River Discovery Center Authority and the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers to produce separate environmental documents on the same project.

Such an approach, she said, makes it difficult for the public to review all the analysis and has the potential to create inconsistencies.

She added that the decision to produce separate documents needlessly increased the cost to the taxpayer. “These are our tax dollars, folks,” she said. “So we’re going to be paying double now for something that can be done at one time.”

At the July public hearing, 24 people offered oral comments. Only two speakers said they supported the discovery center proposal. At a June hearing, none of the dozen speakers said he or she favored construction of the discovery center.

Speakers from communities around Whittier Narrows and beyond expressed a variety of concerns with the discovery center proposal during the July 18 hearing.

Laura Sermeno, a student at South El Monte High School, said the EIR failed to recognize the importance of the current nature center. “I don’t know how the nature center isn’t culturally important,” she said, “because it’s been here since the 1930s. And whether or not it’s historical, it’s culturally important.”

Sermeno also proposed that the discovery center be incorporated into the high school, which is across Durfee Avenue from the Natural Area, an idea that another speaker said was “the best thing I’ve heard today.”

Speaker Gabi McLean, who claimed a finance background, said she supported what she called the project’s original goals of education, habitat restoration and the importance of water but questioned the current proposal’s costs. “Can we accomplish those objectives in a more cost efficient way?” she asked. “I think we can.”

El Monte resident Maria Saucedo said the project would introduce fees as the county’s Natural History Museum had done. “This will happen to us again,” she said.

Other speakers focused their comments on the wildlife and habitat of the Natural Area and the impact the discovery center could have on them.

Lou Orr, of Pico Rivera, said he was concerned about the impact of the project on the Natural Area, a place he first visited in 1954 at the age of seven. As an adult, he said, he introduced his children and grandchildren to “the wonders of nature” there.

Cynthia Guthrie, of Whittier, said the project would put at risk a number of sensitive native plants. “I don’t understand how this development can be called conservation,” she said.

She also said that, growing up in the San Gabriel Valley, she and her friends focused their visits to Eaton Canyon and other parks on outdoor activities, spending little time in interpretive centers because “we preferred to spend our time in real nature.”

Speaker Mike Shatynski, who was one of only two people who spoke in support of the proposal, said the discovery center’s water education focus was important.

Blanca Figueroa, mayor of South El Monte and the day’s final speaker, urged all parties to work collectively to meet the project’s objectives while protecting the environment. “We always say less is more,” she said, “so let’s look at this and try to do what is effective to conserve and protect and hold on to what we see not only here but around the world.”

The deadline for public comments on the San Gabriel River Discovery Center draft environmental impact report is Monday, Aug. 3.

The deadline for comments on the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers’ environmental assessment for the project is Aug. 20.

Both documents are available at <http://discoverycenterauthority.org/>.

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>