

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

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State agency's 'edifice complex' siphoning away millions of public dollars from its conservation mission in the San Gabriel Valley

Rivers and Mountains Conservancy ignored its own grant guidelines in awarding itself and partners \$3 million for construction of controversial \$30 million San Gabriel River center. The agency plans two more interpretive centers in the same immediate area.

SOUTH EL MONTE, Calif. (Feb. 12, 2010) — A state agency created to preserve open space and habitat in the San Gabriel Valley is pouring millions of dollars into a controversial and costly San Gabriel River interpretive center even as it plans to build two more interpretive centers in the same east Los Angeles County area.

The San Gabriel and Lower Los Angeles Rivers and Mountains Conservancy's \$30 million San Gabriel River Discovery Center, proposed for the Whittier Narrows Natural Area and wildlife sanctuary on the San Gabriel River, was approved in January by a joint powers authority led by the conservancy.

Construction of the Discovery Center would require demolition of the one interpretive center that currently serves the immediate area, as well as the bulldozing of wildlife habitat within a county Significant Ecological Area.

Yet the conservancy, through another joint powers authority, has plans to build two more interpretive centers, each less than three miles from the proposed site of the Discovery Center.

The Watershed Conservation Authority, led by the conservancy, plans to build the "Duck Farm on the San Gabriel River," an interpretive center with many elements similar to those of the Discovery Center. And the authority has included as part of its proposed update to the Whittier Narrows Master Plan a "welcome center" to be built within the Whittier Narrows Recreation Area, which includes the natural area.

The County of Los Angeles and two municipal water districts are pouring millions more public dollars into the Discovery Center even as taxes and water rates increase.

"It's indefensible and obscene," said Gloria Valladolid, board member of the Friends of the Whittier Narrows Natural Area. "When each passing day seems to bring news of more budget cuts to education, other basic services and even emergency services, to build even one of these projects would be questionable.

"But to take millions of dollars from the community, destroy an existing interpretive center and then build three redundant facilities — is this really the way to manage public resources?"

Questions have also been raised regarding the propriety of the \$3 million grant the conservancy gave itself and its partners to build the Discovery Center.

A request under the California Public Records Act revealed that the conservancy provided the \$3 million for the Discovery Center even though the project "was not included in the [conservancy's] regular competitive grant process" — a process the agency spent tens of thousands of tax dollars to develop and implement.

In a letter accompanying materials provided in response to the request, Belinda Faustinos, executive officer of the conservancy, the San Gabriel River Discovery Center Authority and the Watershed Conservation Authority, stated that no application was submitted for the grant to the Discovery Center and that the grant program guidelines "do not apply to this particular project."

"It's this kind of lack of accountability that leads to taxpayer cynicism and distrust of government," said Friends board member Valladolid.

"The conservancy was created to preserve, restore and protect open space and habitat to benefit the community and the environment upon which we all depend. It certainly wasn't created to take our tax dollars and dot the land with buildings."

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>