

Friends of the Whittier Narrows Natural Area

***Campaign to save Whittier Narrows Natural Area***

**Contact:** Jim Odling, (323) 227-1822  
Frank P. Angel or Jeff El-Hajj,  
of Angel Law, (310) 314-6433

P.O. Box 3522  
South El Monte CA 91733  
<http://www.naturalareafriends.net>  
[info@naturalareafriends.net](mailto:info@naturalareafriends.net)

**For immediate release**

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**Agency hid \$2M in costs, including \$890K project deficit, in quest for \$7M from state to build controversial water museum, records show**

*Application from joint powers San Gabriel River Discovery Center Authority attempts to skirt state grant program requirement that grant and all other committed funds equal amount needed to build project. \$22M project falls at least \$9M short even with grant.*

SOUTH EL MONTE, Calif. (Jan. 6, 2011) — Last June, Robert Apodaca, president of the San Gabriel River Discovery Center Authority Board of Directors, signed a form that was part of the agency's application for a \$7 million grant of state bond funds from a program whose awardees could be announced as early as February.

With his signature on the "Grant Scope/Cost Estimate Form," required by the state Department of Parks and Recreation grant program, Apodaca was certifying that the "estimated total project cost" to construct the main building of the four-agency joint powers authority's \$22 million water museum and meeting hall project was \$12.2 million and that there were no pre-construction costs, including costs related to required compliance with the California Environmental Quality Act, or CEQA.

But a week earlier, Apodaca and the three other board members in attendance at the June 21 authority board meeting unanimously approved a \$1.1 million budget for the fiscal year beginning July 1, with the vast bulk of that budget going to pre-construction costs ("Capital Outlay," \$1,085,318) for the project proposed for a wildlife sanctuary in southeast Los Angeles County, including \$194,000 for "Legal-CEQA" expenses.

These and numerous other misrepresentations, omissions and unproven claims in the authority's application for a grant of Proposition 84 bond funds are outlined in a letter sent Wednesday to the head of the state grant program by the Friends of the Whittier Narrows Natural Area's law firm, Angel Law, which is representing the nonprofit

in a CEQA lawsuit against the authority, challenging the adequacy of the environmental review for the project. The letter, based on a review of public records by the Friends and Angel Law, requests that state officials reject the improper grant application.

The letter and government documents that were reviewed are available at [http://www.naturalareafriends.net/public\\_records](http://www.naturalareafriends.net/public_records). The records also reveal:

- The authority attempted to skirt a grant program requirement that “the total grant alone, or grant plus additional committed funds, must be equal to the funds needed to complete the project” by requesting money to build only the 14,000-square-foot main building of a 5 – 11-acre complex of buildings and other man-made features.

- The authority didn’t disclose an \$890,000 project budget deficit. In a June 21 report to the authority board, authority staff proposed tapping \$2.2 million in “Supplemental Environmental Program Funds” to pay \$890,000 for construction drawings, but the next week \$2.2 million in “Local Funds: Supplemental Environmental Project” were listed in the application, fully committed to covering other costs.

- The application shows only \$5.2 million in total funding, aside from the requested \$7 million, suggesting that even were the authority to receive the grant, it would be short more than \$9 million of the \$22 million needed to complete the project. The shortfall grows to more than \$10 million when the \$890,000 deficit is included.

- A state conservancy that was pilloried in a 2009 state audit for its failure to exercise “adequate fiduciary oversight of bond funds” is identified in the application as “the lead of this collaborative project” but is omitted from the form requiring disclosure of “total funding sources” although it is paying the \$1.1 million in pre-construction costs.

To learn more, visit [http://www.naturalareafriends.net/public\\_records](http://www.naturalareafriends.net/public_records).

### 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>