

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

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**Appeal filed to protect historic Whittier Narrows wildlife sanctuary
from destructive government water museum and meeting hall project**

Appeal comes as state officials reject San Gabriel River Discovery Center Authority request for \$7 million, leaving project budget deficit of \$16 million. Water education is succeeding without project that “has grown too big,” authority official’s statements show.

LOS ANGELES, Calif. (April 18, 2011) — A nonprofit organization dedicated to the preservation of a historic wildlife sanctuary in east Los Angeles County filed notice April 14 with California’s 2nd District Court of Appeal appealing a lower court’s decision allowing a water museum and meeting hall project to move forward.

The lawsuit was originally filed by the Friends of the Whittier Narrows Natural Area on Feb. 19, 2010, in Los Angeles Superior Court.

The suit charges that the San Gabriel River Discovery Center Authority failed to meet its legal obligations under the California Environmental Quality Act when it certified an inadequate final environmental impact report and approved a 5-to-11-acre complex of buildings, parking lot and other manmade features on the ecologically and historically important Whittier Narrows Natural Area, founded in 1939 by the Audubon Society.

“The Discovery Center Authority illegally excluded the public from the environmental review and decision-making process,” said attorney Frank P. Angel, whose environmental law firm, Angel Law, is representing the Friends in its suit. “We look forward to proving our case before the appellate court.”

The notice to appeal was filed the same week that the authority was denied its request for \$7 million in bond money from a California State Parks program that funds the development of nature education facilities.

A review of the authority’s March 2011 budget and other records show that the project is at least \$16 million short of the \$22 million needed for construction.

“Our organization and members are grateful to State Parks for recognizing, as so many in the local community have, that the Discovery Center project would, in fact, take us backwards in our efforts to protect California’s natural and cultural resources,” said James Odling, president of the Friends of the Whittier Narrows Natural Area.

“The authority’s own environmental documents show that the project would destroy or damage up to 140 trees — a repeat of the recent Arcadia oak woodland tragedy,” Odling said. The project also would cause dramatic increases in traffic, water use and energy use at the site, and would generate far higher greenhouse gas emissions and more trash than the existing Whittier Narrows Nature Center, he said.

Statements made in January by the authority’s Anthony Fellow indicate the water museum and meeting hall project fails to address any real community need — a core requirement of the State Parks program that rejected the agency’s grant request.

“Studies show conservation programs are working,” said Fellow, who represents the Upper San Gabriel Valley Municipal Water District on the board. “We’re using the same amount of water now that we did in 1980. We’re doing a good job teaching people how to conserve water.” The Discovery Center, on the other hand, “has grown too big and gotten bogged down in politics and lawsuits,” he said.

Community opposition to the \$22 million taxpayer-funded project has steadily grown since 2008 when Los Angeles County’s environmental review board deemed the project “incompatible” with the Whittier Narrows Significant Ecological Area.

In 2010, the Gabrieleno Band of Mission Indians denounced the plan to build on land recognized as culturally sensitive and potentially disturb human remains and artifacts. Also in 2010, local chapters of major environmental groups, including Sierra Club and the Audubon Society, abandoned the project’s booster committee.

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>