

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](mailto:info@naturalareafriends.net)

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**After failed bid for \$7M, officials consider corporate funding of water museum project, including ‘Miller Brewing Co. Discovery Center’**

*Agency board member offers area brewery as possible backer of controversial Whittier Narrows project agency says is aimed at kids. Officials for the project, the object of a lawsuit, also seek a grant from L.A.-based California Community Foundation.*

SOUTH EL MONTE, Calif. (May 18, 2011) — Officials behind a controversial and financially troubled \$22 million water museum project they say is aimed at Southern California children are considering pursuing corporate sponsorship of the project, saying they would sell naming rights to an area alcohol producer for the right price.

“It wouldn’t bother me if this was the Miller Brewing Company Discovery Center if they wanted to pay the price,” said San Gabriel River Discovery Center Authority board member Anthony Fellow a week after the agency learned its request for \$7 million in state bond funds for nature education facilities had been rejected. A MillerCoors LLC brewery is located on the San Gabriel River in nearby Irwindale, Calif.

Video of Fellow’s comments is at <http://www.youtube.com/naturalareafriends>.

Board member Sam Pedroza, speaking at the same authority board meeting as Fellow April 18 in El Monte, Calif., called the failed bid “a pretty major setback” for the water museum and meeting hall project planned for the Whittier Narrows Natural Area, a wildlife sanctuary in east Los Angeles County.

Pedroza also said the project booster committee, which he chairs, had opposed pursuing corporate funding, but now such funding “is definitely worthy of discussion.”

The project has less than half of the \$22 million needed for construction.

The joint powers Discovery Center Authority, consisting of two water districts, Los Angeles County and a state agency, is also seeking a grant from the Los Angeles-based California Community Foundation. The authority requested \$75,000 to help pay operations costs over two years, said authority Executive Officer Jane Beesley by email.

“The authority has sunk to a new low,” said James Odling, president of the Friends of the Whittier Narrows Natural Area. “With their grant request to the California Community Foundation they’re forcing sick children, diabetes sufferers and others among the ‘most vulnerable’ to compete for charity dollars against big-spending water officials who are willing to use that money to expose kids to further social ills.”

The Friends filed notice in April with California’s 2nd District Court of Appeal appealing a lower court’s decision allowing the water museum project to move forward.

Statements by officials suggest that there is little need for the water museum because existing conservation and education programs are achieving their goals.

“Studies show conservation programs are working,” said Fellow, who also sits on the board of the authority-member Upper San Gabriel Valley Municipal Water District, in January. “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.”

In April, Art Aguilar, general manager of the authority-member Central Basin MWD, said, “We have seen the consumption of water stay about even in the area we serve despite significant population growth. That tells us that Central Basin’s conservation and education programs are working, and also shows that the people we serve are serious about being good stewards of water today and in the future.”

Community opposition to the project continues to grow. The Gabrieleno Band of Mission Indians last year denounced the project because it could disturb ancestral remains and artifacts. And 1,500 people have signed a petition opposing the project and calling instead for renovation of the existing Whittier Narrows Nature Center.

A decision on the California Community Foundation grant is expected in June.

#### 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>