

Friends of the Whittier Narrows Natural Area

Campaign to save Whittier Narrows Natural Area

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Questions regarding fiscal, public accountability for \$30M watershed center bring only silence from government, water district officials

Officials pushing the San Gabriel River Discovery Center fail to answer questions regarding apparent irregularities in project funding during public meeting on Thursday.

COMMERCE, Calif. (July 17, 2009) — Government and water district officials planning to build an unpopular \$30 million watershed education and meeting center in eastern Los Angeles County greeted questions on the project's apparent lack of fiscal and public accountability with stone-faced silence at a public board meeting for the project held at the Central Basin Municipal Water District office here on Thursday.

Members of the five-person San Gabriel River Discovery Center Authority board and staff from member agencies of the joint powers authority failed to answer questions regarding the millions in tax and utility dollars that have already been spent and the tens of millions that would be spent if the San Gabriel River Discovery Center is built on the Whittier Narrows Natural Area as planned.

"I guess a board dominated by career bureaucrats, which usually meets when most people are at work, isn't used to answering questions from the public," said Jim Odling after the meeting. Odling, chair of the Friends of the Whittier Narrows Natural Area, a group opposed to the discovery center, posed the questions at the meeting.

"The people have a right to know why and how their money is being spent," Odling said. "Unfortunately, we received no answers today."

The Natural Area is a county wildlife sanctuary on the San Gabriel River between the Montebello and Puente Hills. Critics charge that the project would destroy important wildlife habitat, would waste scarce public dollars and would introduce user fees in a working-class and minority area already hard hit by rising taxes and water rates.

On Thursday, officials from Discovery Center Authority member agencies sat silent and grim as Odling asked his questions, displaying the budgets, letters and news stories that formed their basis.

He asked why the project's \$3 million grant from the state's San Gabriel & Lower Los Angeles Rivers and Mountains Conservancy did not go through the standard competitive grant process. He also asked why information on the discovery center grant apparently wasn't available on the state's bond accountability or bond awards Web site.

Odling asked why Central Basin MWD was giving the discovery center \$80,000 at the same time that it was approving an increase in the price of water to its more than two million customers.

Los Angeles County Department of Parks and Recreation staff was asked why the county was continuing to spend resources on the discovery center while elsewhere it was making unprecedented budget cuts through furlough days at the county court system and while a county fire station in nearby El Monte, Calif., was closing.

Discovery center officials also were asked why no notice was placed in any newspaper announcing release of the EIR in June in light of the fact that the discovery center has been marketed, and is identified in the EIR, as a regional facility with a 25-mile service radius.

Again referring to the project's alleged regional impact, Odling asked why the EIR was placed only in three Whittier Narrows-area libraries when the discovery center, and he asked why the document was not made available at the Whittier Narrows Nature Center where actual visitors to the proposed project site could review it.

Odling also asked why the Sanitation Districts of Los Angeles County in 2006 told the Los Angeles Times that \$2.2 million from a coastal sewage spill settlement would be funding environmental research programs at the discovery center. The word "research" does not appear in the EIR's project description, he said.

Sam Pedroza, an environmental planner with the Sanitation Districts who sits on the Discovery Center Authority board, was not present at Thursday's meeting.

Finally, the board was asked whether audits of the Discovery Center Authority were available and how the public could review the audits.

Officials offered no response to the questions and gave no indication whether they would provide answers in the future.

“What is the truth about the discovery center?” asks Odling.

“In 2006, we were told environmental research would be conducted at the discovery center, but research is nowhere in the EIR.

“Now we’re being told that it’s an educational facility, but the EIR shows that the only real growth over the current nature center is in the endless number of government and water district meetings, receptions and VIP tours that would be held there.

“Is this project really the best way to use millions in taxpayer and rate payer dollars, especially during a recession that is devastating public services, public coffers and family budgets?”

Thursday’s board meeting came two days before the second and final public meeting on the project’s draft environmental impact report.

At the first EIR meeting, held in South El Monte, Calif., on June 24, 2009, the community rejected the discovery center proposal.

At the June meeting, speakers from the community offered no support to discovery center proposal, most saying they favored protecting the Natural Area and preserving the current nature center.

The final public meeting on the discovery center draft environmental impact report is scheduled for Saturday, 2 – 4 p.m. at South El Monte High School, 1001 N. Durfee Ave. in South El Monte.

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>