

Friends of the Whittier Narrows Natural Area

Campaign to save Whittier Narrows Natural Area

Contact: Gloria Valladolid, (626) 282-7482
Frank P. Angel or Jeff El-Hajj,
of Angel Law, (310) 314-6433

P.O. Box 3522
South El Monte CA 91733
<http://naturalareafriends.net>
info@naturalareafriends.net

For immediate release

March 5, 2010

Suit filed against San Gabriel River Discovery Center Authority to void decision to raze existing nature center, build on wildlife sanctuary

Friends of the Whittier Narrows Natural Area bring suit under California Environmental Quality Act charging inadequate, illegal environmental review and approval of project.

LOS ANGELES, March 5, 2010 — A nonprofit organization dedicated to the preservation of a historic wildlife sanctuary in east Los Angeles County has filed a lawsuit in county superior court challenging a government agency's environmental review and approval of a controversial and costly proposed interpretive center.

The project, the San Gabriel River Discovery Center, proposed for the Whittier Narrows Natural Area, between the Montebello and Puente-Chino hills, would require demolition of the existing nature center while sacrificing badly needed endangered-species habitat for a sprawling compound consisting of a 14,000-square-foot main building, 116-car parking lot and other structures.

The lead agency for the taxpayer-funded \$30 million project is a subsidiary — a so-called joint powers authority — of the state's San Gabriel and Lower Los Angeles Rivers and Mountains Conservancy, the County of Los Angeles, Upper San Gabriel Valley Municipal Water District and Central Basin Municipal Water District.

The lawsuit, filed by environmental law firm Angel Law on behalf of the Friends of the Whittier Narrows Natural Area on Feb. 19, charges that the San Gabriel River Discovery Center Authority failed to meet its legal obligations under the California Environmental Quality Act, or CEQA, and the Seismic Hazards Mapping Act when it certified an inadequate final environmental impact report and approved the project.

CEQA violations cited in the suit include omissions by the authority to fully disclose and evaluate the environmental harm that the project will cause. The lawsuit

also charges that the authority ignored the project's public safety impacts from seismic hazards and failed to prepare a feasible, funded and legally enforceable plan to mitigate the project's adverse environmental effects.

"It's a sad irony that the authority has relentlessly marketed and greenwashed the Discovery Center as an environmental project and yet has fallen so woefully short of its legal obligations under laws intended to preserve our environmental quality and communities. But it's not surprising," said Friends board member Gloria Valladolid.

"The Authority and its predecessor steering committee have been at this for a decade. But in that time they've done little or nothing to preserve or restore habitat at the natural area or to enhance existing environmental education programs there."

The lawsuit includes a request that the court place an injunction on the project unless and until a legally adequate EIR is prepared, circulated and certified.

"Until the public is provided a full and accurate picture by which to judge this dubious project, valuable recreational space and wildlife habitat should not be taken away from the community or the visiting public, and the beloved Whittier Narrows Nature Center should be left alone and allowed to continue its valuable community services," said attorney Frank P. Angel.

The vast majority of community members who provided comments on the Discovery Center and its EIR vehemently objected to the project and to the failure of the report to fully analyze or disclose its effects.

For information on the Friends of the Whittier Narrows Natural Area, please contact Gloria Valladolid at (626) 282-7482. For information on the Friends' lawsuit, please contact Frank P. Angel or Jeff El-Hajj, of Angel Law, at (310) 314-6433.

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>