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Local News

A bright idea for SP bridge lighting?

Vincent Thomas boosters propose energy-saving diodes

By Donna Littlejohn
STAFF WRITER



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Let there be light-emitting diodes.

Just when you may have thought California's energy crunch had hammered the final nail in the coffin of San Pedro's bridge-lighting plan, the project is being resurrected — this time using the energy-saving technology of light-emitting diodes.

Begun 13 years ago, the community's bridge-lighting proposal seemed simple in the beginning. But the decorative public arts project has been stalled by Los Angeles riots, environmental critics, changes in designers, scrapped laser designs, rising costs and, finally, the state's energy crisis.

"It seems like every time we've gotten close, an act of God has stopped us," said Louis Dominguez, chairman of the Vincent Thomas Bridge Lighting Committee. "I'm not willing to wait. The whole committee is not willing to wait. We've waited too long."

The idea of using light-emitting diodes, or LEDs, was put forward this week by Dominguez as a way to salvage the project.

"We're trying to come up with an 'energy independent' bridge-lighting idea," Dominguez said. "We believe the technology is there that would allow us to do that."

LEDs, those tiny lights used to illuminate displays on microwave ovens and car dashboards, require only a fraction of the wattage of regular bulbs.

"By itself, just one (LED) bulb doesn't do much," Dominguez said. "But if you bundle together 200 of them, they're quite visible."

A bundle of 250, he said, would be seen from 6 miles away, requiring only about 8 watts and lasting 100,000 hours — "Roughly 34 years, under normal use," Dominguez said. "They're incredibly efficient."

Taking the idea a step further to save even more energy, Dominguez

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said the lights could be powered by a combination of batteries operated by solar or wind power.

“Then we wouldn't be tied into the power grid at all,” Dominguez said.

“If we can put together a good proposal, we want to go to the governor with it,” he said. “Not only would it accomplish what we want to do — beautifying the bridge — but it could be a demonstration project showing what can be done to make an area attractive and at the same time not using much energy.”

Whether LEDs have enough muscle to light up an entire bridge, however, remains to be seen.

The plan would return to the original design of tracer lights, using tiny blue and white lights to outline the spans of the bridge that connects San Pedro to Terminal Island.

Critics of the earlier design, which called for large-scale illumination of the bridge's 350-foot-high towers, likely would have an easier time signing off on a design that used LED tracer lights, said Catherine Rich, executive officer of The Urban Wildlands Group, a nonprofit organization based in Los Angeles.

“There probably would still be an issue of how bright the lights are and whether they are shielded,” Rich said, adding that the new design would have to go back for California Coastal Commission approval again. “I can't comment on it, sight unseen.”

Pushed by environmentalists

But she noted that LEDs and tracer lights were pushed early on by environmentalists concerned about the project's effects on wildlife and the environment.

“That's what we wanted from the beginning,” she said. “I think shielded LEDs would probably be a wonderful solution.”

Eric Moses, assistant deputy to Los Angeles Mayor Richard Riordan, said the Mayor's Office supports the new plan.

“I think it's an idea that has some legs,” he said. “This proposal is a novel one and something the mayor hopes the governor will consider.”

Dominguez said he plans to contact bridge-lighting critics, who only reluctantly signed off on a revamped proposal after the original was turned down by the Coastal Commission.

Environmentalists faulted the proposal on several fronts, saying it posed a hazard to migrating birds, added to nighttime light pollution, and wasted energy.

“I'm hoping they'll love the idea,” Dominguez said of the latest plan. “They're the ones who were saying we should go back to the tracer lights.”

Costs and other details still need to be worked out, Dominguez said. The committee still has the more than \$300,000 raised for the project sitting in the bank.

How LEDs work

Compact LEDs radiate a very small but potentially brilliant light with an electronic component that glows when electricity flows through it. While costing more to purchase than incandescent lights, they use only a fraction of the power regular light bulbs do, making them more

cost-effective in the long run, experts say.

The lights can last tens of thousands of hours and are impervious to heat, cold, shock and vibration. They are being used for traffic signs and signals, computer displays and control panels.

Since the beginning, the bridge-lighting proposal has faced repeated defeat, only to be resurrected through new designs.

The state's growing energy crisis appeared to bury the project, at least for the time being.

"Even though we have the power (through the city's Department of Water and Power) to light the bridge, it would seem in horribly bad taste to go ahead with it," Dominguez said.

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