



Daily Breeze

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Local News

Plug pulled on plan to light SP bridge

Coastal Commission says project poses serious threat to birds, environment

By Donna Littlejohn
STAFF WRITER

Lights out.

After 12 years of community fund raising and planning, the California Coastal Commission on Tuesday extinguished a plan to light up San Pedro's Vincent Thomas Bridge, saying it posed a deadly threat to migratory birds.

The eleventh-hour decision stunned community leaders who labored for more than a decade to raise more than \$400,000 for the project.

"I just watched 12 years of my life thrown away," said Louis Dominguez, chairman of the Vincent Thomas Bridge Lighting Committee.

Plagued by numerous delays over the years, the project appeared finally headed for victory in recent months when environmentalists lodged a last-minute protest with the California Coastal Commission, which has final authority over the plan.

"I don't need any more studies to tell me this is dangerous to birds," said commission Chairwoman Sara Wan before Tuesday's 5-2 vote at a meeting in Santa Monica.

"There is no question what's going to happen birds will die," Wan said. "How many, I can't tell you. But for some of us, there is more to this world than man. There are other species."

Energy concerns

Wan also criticized the amount of energy the bridge lights would demand.

"For our own survival, we need to have a real concern about how we use our natural resources," she said.

"It's a beautiful bridge," said Commissioner Shirley Detloff. "I applaud the concept that the artist has put forward. However, something is missing ... environmental studies were not completed.

"There is more evidence on the side that says lighting could be very harmful (to wildlife) and the responsibility of this commission is to protect the environment."

While commission staff members initially suggested eliminating only the most powerful of the lights, a revised recommendation introduced by commission staff just hours before the vote went further.

It called for all the lights to be turned off after the city's planned Dec. 31 millennium celebration. The lights could be turned on afterward only if an extensive study could prove the lights would not be harmful to wildlife.

But commissioners turned down the option to light up the bridge even for one night, tossing out the bridge lighting plan altogether.

The project began as a grass-roots, community drive to permanently light the bridge but grew into a city-sponsored campaign recognizing the Vincent Thom as Bridge as the official welcoming monument for Los Angeles. As the project was delayed through the years, it was decided that New Year's Eve 1999 would be a good kickoff date.

Fund-raisers included high-profile bridge walks and tin can collections in area stores. Thousands of residents contributed to the cause.

All of the funds raised for the project came from private donors, except for a \$50,000 donation from the city.

"Basically, our goal is to produce a distinctive lighting project," said Adolfo Nodal, general manager of the Los Angeles Cultural Affairs Department.

"People in the community of San Pedro have been working to illuminate the BRIDGE/B2 Bridge for 12 years," Dominguez told commissioners. "At night, this architecturally magnificent edifice disappears completely."

But in the end, commissioners ruled that the decorative lights didn't justify a threat to the area's wildlife.

Also expressing concern was the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service.

In a letter to Caltrans, Assistant Field Supervisor Jim A. Bartel said studies show that birds can become disoriented when flying into illuminated areas, colliding with structures or each other.

Features

John Bogert

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