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Local News

Bridge lights get dark review

By Donna Littlejohn
STAFF WRITER

Panel says beams put birds at risk Panel says beams put birds at risk

A state report backs a plan to light up San Pedro's Vincent Thomas Bridge, but only if an array of four 7,000-watt Skytracker lights the project's showpiece is doused.

The California Coastal Commission staff recommendation will be presented Tuesday when commissioners take up the matter at their meeting in Santa Monica.

The report was posted this week on the commission's Web site.

"Based on the information we received from wildlife agencies and from experts in the field, there appears to be a potential problem with the Skytrackers (for migratory birds)," said Al Padilla, coastal program analyst for the Coastal Commission. "The lights should not be put up until we know what those impacts are."

Citing concerns that the high-intensity Skytracker beams could disorient migratory birds flying over them, staff members suggested the Skytrackers be used only for the citywide New Year's Eve celebration.

After that, they have to be shut down pending further environmental studies. They could be turned back on only if state environmental agencies conclude they will not be harmful to the area's wildlife.

The recommendation left both bridge lighting proponents and environmentalists dissatisfied.

"This takes a major element out of the overall design," said Louis Dominguez, chairman of the Vincent Thomas Bridge Lighting Committee. "We'll have to go back to (the designer) to see how it could be adjusted."

Environmentalists were preparing a response to the commission report and gave only limited comment Tuesday.

"It doesn't go nearly far enough," Catherine Rich, executive director of the Urban Wildlands Group, said of the report.

The Xenon Skytracker lights project toward the sky.

The project also calls for 120 floodlights 200 to 1,125 watts each and eight reflective discs.

While the Skytrackers were a key component in the project, Dominguez said the remaining lights would provide enough power to illuminate the bridge that connects San Pedro to Terminal Island across the main channel of Los Angeles Harbor.

"We'll be able to live with it," he said.

Ann Cantrell, conservation chairwoman of the El Dorado Audubon Society in Long BRIDGE/B2 Bridge applauded the recommendation to eliminate the Skytracker lights, but said the other bridge lights also could pose a threat to wildlife.

"I do feel those Skytrackers are deathtraps, but I'm not sure those others aren't, too," Cantrell said.

Dominguez criticized the recommendation, saying there are no hard studies that prove the lights are hazardous to migratory birds flying over lighted bridges.

"If someone could show us proof that this will affect migratory birds, then we'd be happy to do away with them altogether," Dominguez said. "No one on the (bridge lighting) committee wants to cause injury to migratory birds."

The harbor is located along what is known as the Pacific Flyway where millions of shorebirds and waterfowl travel between northern breeding grounds and southern wintering sites.

"Although there are no available studies about the nocturnal migrants that fly over the Harbor Area, approximately 100,000 to 1 million birds use Seal Beach, which is approximately 20 miles to the south, as a major stopover ..." the report states.

Studies have concluded that lights on tall structures can attract migrating birds and cause them to become trapped in the intense beam, eventually becoming disoriented and falling to the ground.

But the 10-page report noted that there was no documentation of impacts on birds regarding lighted bridges over waterways. The report, however, said that could be because the birds are hitting the bridge's structures and falling into the water.

The report also pointed out that since 1991, 3,000-watt similar lights shine from the 25-story Landmark Square Building in Long Beach. Since the lights went up in 1991, there have been no reported problems

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