

Monday, April 29, 2002

Local News

SP bridge project finally will see the lights

By Donna Littlejohn

DAILY BREEZE

Folks in San Pedro don't give up easily.

Take the bridge lights.

Launched more than a decade ago, the town's grass-roots campaign to string decorative lights on the Vincent Thomas Bridge has met with a series of setbacks and defeats.

First it was money. Then a design snag. Finally, three years ago, concerns raised by environmentalists killed the plan, with state officials ruling that the bright "skytracker" beams being proposed would endanger migrating birds.

But supporters now say they've found the solution: Use energy-efficient LED lights that run on solar power.

A trial run to see how the tiny blue lights would look on the bridge is set for 9 p.m. Wednesday. Only a small number of lights will be installed for the test, but residents should be able to see them from points southwest of the bridge.

"They've been trying to do this for the last five years," said Pervaiz Lodhie, president of Torrance-based Ledtronics Inc., which is helping with the project.

Make that more than 10 years.

Supporters, who organized bridge walks and coin drives in the early 1990s, originally hoped to light up the bridge for its 1993 anniversary celebration. Later, they aimed to flip the switch for the city's New Year's celebration in 2000.

The new lighting technology, supporters believe, will finally provide the breakthrough they need.

"The technology has changed," said Chip Israel, who heads Lighting Design Alliance of Long Beach, the design firm for the project. "Two years ago we could not have done this."

Also assisting in the project are Caltrans, DWP and the Los Angeles Department of Cultural Affairs. The bridge is Los Angeles' official citywide welcoming monument.

Ledtronics lights – or LEDs – are more efficient than standard lights and are being used locally in traffic signals.

A traditional traffic light uses 70 to 90 watts per light, while LED lights use 7 to 10 watts. The lights also last up to 11 years and require little or no maintenance.

The lights are based on light emitting diode technology, or LED.

"We're trying to beautify the Vincent Thomas Bridge as the gateway (to Los Angeles)," Lodhie said.

Backers hope the 6,060-foot-long bridge linking San Pedro to Terminal Island will be outlined with blue lights by September, when a tall ship festival is planned for San Pedro.

For this week's trial run, a small section of lights will be installed on the southwest end of the bridge, beginning at 8 p.m. Wednesday. They will be turned on about 9 p.m. so officials can see how far the lights project from different angles.

"We're going to test the visibility distance," Lodhie said. "We'll have different people standing at different points watching."

An initial test using the low-power, environmentally friendly lights two weeks ago looked promising, he said.

"We're going with a blue color so it stands out among the other high-pressure (amber-colored) sodium lights in the harbor," Lodhie said. "Everyone was concerned the LED lights would disappear, but they didn't wash out even with the thousands of sodium lights in the harbor."

Residents have purchased bridge key chains and hats, walked across the bridge for \$2 each and emptied their coin purses to raise money for the project. Bolstered by corporate and city donations, the bridge lighting fund now stands at about \$400,000, but it is not clear how much the LED project will cost.

"Residents have been very, very patient with the whole process," Israel said. What's Next? Residents can view a small sample of the new lights from points southwest of the Vincent Thomas Bridge beginning at 9 p.m. Wednesday. Lights are expected to remain on for about an hour.