

If You Don't Build It, Green Will Come

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Historically, the Los Angeles River was the life-blood water source for the City of Los Angeles; that is until most of the water was expended in the early 1900s. By the 1940s, a majority of the river was buried in cement and the Los Angeles River has looked much the same ever since. River advocates have referred to it as "one of the most underutilized natural resources in the Los Angeles area," according to the Los Angeles River Revitalization Plan.

But a series of new plans which include Confluence Park, the LA River Revitalization, and a 1996 LA County Los Angeles River Master Plan have spurred dreams and aggressive community action to change the image of the river to an active-green area while adding open space to one of the most park deprived areas in the nation. With the defeat of efforts to save Elephant Hill still fresh in their memory, the Northeast community's struggle to preserve green-open space has switched to the Avenue 19 Bridge rehabilitation project.

Situated at the confluence of the Los Angeles and Arroyo Seco River, the Pasadena Freeway, and the METRO Gold Line, the Avenue 19 Bridge is a tiny four-lane overpass which is slated for seismic rehabilitation under a "state mandatory project retrofit project," and is one 120 city owned bridges which are slated for construction upgrades. Open space proponents say the retrofit is unnecessary.

But with the Elysian Park Fault line, capable of a 7.0 quake, only 2.8 miles away, the City of Los Angeles contends the bridge construction's does not meet current structural standards and consequently is not safe.

"The bridge is vulnerable to collapse during an earthquake. We wouldn't construct a bridge today with this very slender 16-inch diameter stilts. These are very vulnerable to seismic earthquake(s)," said John Koo from the City of Los Angeles Bridge Improvement Program.

To alleviate the potential safety problems, the city has announced three alternatives that may be implemented within a few months. Alternative proposes to retrofit the sixteen-inch columns to 36-inches at a cost of \$4 million, providing necessary support. Alternative II will replace the entire Avenue 19 Bridge with a state of the art viaduct, including new 1940s style street lighting and a mural by local artists Paul Tzanetopoulos. The final alternative also calls for a completely new bridge "with a built-in feature that allows the future lengthening of the bridge (if) the Arroyo Seco is widened (in the future)," explained Koo.

But at the first public community meeting to discuss proposals for the future of the Avenue 19 bridge on October 12, Northeast Los Angeles community members said that they were upset because they had not been informed about reconstruction plans earlier. "I think the community needs to be asked. I don't know what the community at large feels. (City planners are) coming around telling us what they want us to do. How come we haven't been told about it," said Arroyo Seco Neighborhood Council member Bill Murray.

Los Angeles Councilmember Ed Reyes' office who hosted last week's public meeting and in whose district the bridge is located, denied charges that area communities had been left out of the planning process. "I don't know why they're upset, we're having meetings. We want to get a perspective on what they (community) want to do," said Lupe Vela, First District Senior Staff and Ad Hoc River Committee member.

But prior to October 12, no public meeting had taken place; only two presentations about the proposed bridge rehabilitation were made to local groups, the North East Los Angeles Open Space Coalition and the Arroyo Seco Neighborhood Council (ASNC). The ASNC "recommends the City not implement the planned Avenue 19 Bridge Replacement Project for a minimum of two years," according to their website.

With the completion of the first public meeting, it now appears community members are in support of removing the bridge entirely to implement what they consider a revitalization of the area.

"There are a number of people that share a vision that think we should share a park (at the Avenue 19 Bridge)," said Arthur Golding, LA River advocate who is also an urban design firm architect. "We need a plan for the whole area and anything that has to do with the bridge has to do with (local open space). This effort is about rebuilding the city. It's not about building roads, its about cities," commented Golding.

Other Northeast Los Angeles residents concurred with Golding's statement.

"The Avenue 19 Bridge is said by the city to need rebuilding and considered to be a rush just because the money currently exists. If this bridge were removed and not rebuilt it could facilitate wilderness regeneration, but the city presents the plans as if as if it were a done deal," wrote ASNC member Scott Rubel.

In fact, the rebuilding of the bridge is not a "done deal." As advocated by green-open space supporters, the complete removal of the bridge has now become an option. But the city warned that delay in refurbishing the bridge could mean funds for the project are taken back and even suggested the bridge be rebuilt and knocked down later if it was truly the community's wish to widen the nearby Arroyo Seco River, the possible future site for a Confluence Park.

Removal of the bridge would cost approximately \$500,000; replacement would likely exceed \$4 million.

But a total removal of the bridge would divert traffic to neighboring roads and could significantly increase area traffic on San Fernando Road, according to City of Los Angeles Transportation Engineer Bearj Leon Sarkis. Currently, 1,300 cars per hour use the Avenue 19 Bridge during morning peak hours, or 20 vehicles per minute. But city officials acknowledge no formal traffic analysis has examined how removal of the bridge would impact area traffic.

Residents seem hopeful that Councilman Reyes will take the community's suggestions earnestly. Reyes' himself has written previously about "transforming (the LA) river from a neglected backyard to a beautiful welcoming front yard." It appears with the community hope of removing the Avenue 19 Bridge he may get that chance.

No date is set for a decision on the bridge project. But city officials hinted that a delay of more than two months could remove the Avenue 19 rehabilitation project from the top of the list and there is no guarantee of future monies for the project.

For more information on the Avenue 19 Bridge rehabilitation project contact Councilman Ed Reyes' office at (213) 473-7001 or contact the Arroyo Seco Neighborhood Council at (866) LA-HELPS or visit <http://www.asnc.us>.