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Old foes bash new water plan Wetlands proposal finds familiar critics

By Kerry Cavanaugh

More than a year after neighbors denounced a plan to develop a 75-acre wetlands using sanitized wastewater at Sepulveda Basin, city engineers have come back with a scaled-back proposal and new location nearby.

Critics have already raised new questions.

The latest incarnation would transform 30 to 40 vacant acres along Woodley Avenue into a series of shallow waterways lined with cattails and bulrushes and bisected with boardwalks and trails.

Water sanitized at the Tillman Reclamation Plant -- the same water used in Lake Balboa -- would be filtered through the wetlands, where the plants would remove enough nitrogen pollution to help meet new water quality guidelines in the Los Angeles River.

But some residents who opposed the initial plan say the new proposal is still fatally flawed because it would eliminate open space, attract disease-carrying mosquitoes and serve as a sanitation facility masquerading as an environmental asset.

"This is not recreation, it's not wetlands," said Rosemarie White, a member of the Canada Goose Project and the Angeles Chapter of the Sierra Club. "It's construction that will have the appearance of a wetlands. It functions as a water filtration plant for the city of Los Angeles."

But other environmentalists and river guardians say the wetlands would be exactly the kind of natural, water-purifying method they've been pushing the city to embrace for years.

"If you have a proposed project that's going to add habitat, not build a new facility and help address (water quality regulations) in a natural way and on top of it add other benefits to the community ... then what's the problem?" asked Melanie Winter, director of The River Project.

The newest proposal is only in the draft stages and is being presented to local neighborhood councils in advance of a public hearing that has not yet been scheduled, said Adel Hagekhalil, manager of the Sanitation Bureau's Wastewater Engineering Services Division.

"We understand the value of the basin. We understand it's a jewel in the Valley and we want to keep it a jewel," Hagekhalil said. "We think we'll provide an enhancement."

The city has tried to address most of the concerns raised after the city proposed creating a 50- to 75-acre wetlands south of Burbank Boulevard, Hagekhalil said.

The new site is farther from residential areas than the original plan. Two vector experts have drafted a plan to trim vegetation and use mosquito-eating fish and larvicides to keep down the mosquito population.

The city will meet with Federal Aviation Administration officials on ways to limit waterfowl in the Van Nuys Airport flight path.

Some residents aren't convinced.

"The best way to prevent odor is to prevent water from remaining there. The best way to prevent mosquitoes is to not invite them in," said Gerald Silver, president of Homeowners of Encino. "The best way is to keep the basin out of the hands of sewage use altogether."

Sanitation officials initially proposed a wetlands in 2001 as a way to reduce nitrogen pollution in the 50 million gallons of treated wastewater that flows daily into the Los Angeles River from the city's Tillman Water Reclamation Plant.

The Los Angeles Regional Water Quality Control Board has adopted strict limits on nitrogen, which feeds algae and is dangerous to fish and wildlife in the river.

Sanitation engineers initially hoped they could meet nitrogen limits with a large wetlands filtration process, which could be significantly cheaper than a mechanical solution. Wetlands vegetation can suck up between 25 and 75 percent of nitrogen in wastewater.

The large wetlands didn't work out and the city began upgrading the reclamation plant to remove most of the nitrogen, Hagekhalil said. But the city still needs a smaller wetlands to remove remaining nitrogen from as much as 10 million gallons of wastewater a day. The wetlands-treated water will then be blended with wastewater directly from the plant.

"The combination of the two processes will help us make sure we meet requirements," Hagekhalil said.

If successful at Sepulveda Basin, sanitation officials hope they will be able to construct wetlands to filter storm water and urban runoff in other areas of the city.

The city has included \$12 million in its capitol improvement program for the wetlands. The city has the support of the Army Corps of Engineers, which runs Sepulveda Basin as a flood control basin, and will apply for up to \$5 million in federal funding for the wetlands.