

Transit officials back down on plan to move Mulholland Drive bridge

By Rick Orlov rick.orlov@dailynews.com 213-978-0390 213-978-0390 Staff Writer

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Faced with opposition that threatened to delay the project for more than a year, transit officials have backed away from plans to relocate the Mulholland Drive bridge over the 405 Freeway.

"We've decided that moving forward with a parallel bridge will not be feasible," said Dave Sotero, a spokesman for the Metropolitan Transportation Authority. "We made a good faith effort with the community to explore alternatives, but we are going back to our original plans."

Caltrans and Metro had originally planned to build a new overpass about 200 feet south of the current Mulholland bridge, then dismantle the old one, as part of the freeway widening project.

Now, however, the bridge will be rebuilt in its current location as part of the \$1.03 billion widening of the 405 Freeway to accommodate carpool lanes.

The decision, announced late Thursday at a community meeting held by Metro and Caltrans, came amid complaints about the bridge project by nearby residents.

In addition, the Mulholland Scenic Parkway Design Review Board last week set a series of conditions on the plans for the new bridge - which would have allowed the existing bridge to remain in place for the nearly two-year construction period as the new one was built.

The main problem was the board's demand that a "world-class" architect be hired to design the new bridge.

"After careful consideration, it would be difficult to accept the recommendations ... because it would invalidate the process used," Metro said in its report.

"Due to anticipated delays in the approval process through the city of Los Angeles ... we will return to the original baseline design for the demolition and reconstruction of the Mulholland Bridge."

Sotero and other officials said the decision came down to the additional time and cost in undertaking what was demanded, which could have added a year to the decision-making process.

"When we originally planned this, we were told by the community to take a minimalist approach, which we did," Sotero said. "We had already gone through a vetting process with the community. Hiring a new architect and getting new plans would disrupt our schedule."

Plans now call for the replacement of utilities in the area to begin this summer, with construction to start on the north side of the bridge in late summer.

That work will take seven to 10 months to complete and then the south side of the bridge will be replaced.

Tom Freeman, co-founder of the Canyon Back Alliance, said he was pleased by the decision to revert to the original plans.

"There's no great victory for anyone, but we believe Metro and Caltrans did the right thing by returning to their original plans," Freeman said.

"The realignment would have created a permanent detour, dividing Mulholland into two, non-contiguous roads, forever degrading the scenic and recreational amenities of Mulholland Drive in exchange for dubious short-term traffic benefits."

Questions over the alternative proposal had been raised by several homeowner groups and the Santa Monica Mountains Conservancy, which said it wanted more details on the impact of the new bridge as it related to the Mulholland Scenic Parkway Plan.

Paul Edelman, deputy director of Natural Resources and Planning for the Santa Monica Mountains Conservancy, said it would have been a major test of the plan, which was adopted in 1992.

Edelman said officials at the conservancy believed a new environmental impact report would be needed.

Councilman Paul Koretz, who had supported the alternative proposal, said he understood the decision.

"I thought the alternative plan would have been better by having less impact on traffic," Koretz said. "But hopefully, this will work out for the best."

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