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Monday, July 17, 2000

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Local News

Fight over lights on Vincent Thomas Bridge illuminates coast feud

By Donna Littlejohn
STAFF WRITER

Community leaders are working on an improved plan to illuminate San Pedro's Vincent Thomas Bridge.

But whether the modifications will go far enough to satisfy critics and the state Coastal Commission remains to be seen.

The commission's vote last fall to douse the lights after they were opposed by environmentalists sent proponents back to the drawing board.

Now, the revamped plan eliminating four large "skytracker" lights and redirecting and turning down the wattage on other floodlights is being finalized to send back to commissioners.

"Hopefully, this time, we'll be able to get it through," said Louis Dominguez, chairman of the Vincent Thomas Bridge Lighting Committee. "We've made sure that commission staff have been at all our meetings and we've tried to keep it real open."

But one critic said environmentalists were not included in the redesign.

After participating in two or three meetings at the beginning of the year, Catherine Rich of The Urban Wildlands Group said she has heard nothing more on the project since then and was surprised that the matter was nearly ready to be resubmitted.

"It would have been really courteous if any of those people would have involved us," she said. "I believe we participated in very good faith and showed up at these long meetings and made ourselves available."

Adolfo Nodal, general manager of the Los Angeles Cultural Affairs Department, said bridge lighting supporters "bent over backwards" to include environmentalists.

"We've really met extensively with any environmental group that was interested," Nodal said. "We've taken that input to heart and drastically changed the design to address those issues."

On Nov. 2, the California Coastal Commission rejected the proposal to light up the bridge that connects San Pedro to Terminal Island. The project was the focus of a 12-year-old community fund-raising effort and had the official sponsorship of the city of Los Angeles' Cultural Affairs Department.

Rich and others complained that the decorative bridge lights would pose a hazard to migratory birds. They cited studies that show tall, lighted structures can cause birds to become disoriented and "trapped" in artificial light beams.

Other opponents included representatives from the Audubon Society and the International Dark Sky Association.

While Rich said she hasn't been shown the new plans, she is doubtful enough changes have been made to satisfy environmentalists who prefer either no lights or small, "tracer" lights strung along the bridge structure.

"Tracer lights are the only acceptable way to do this," Rich said. "We don't want floodlights. ... The problem is lighting the tower. It makes it a hazardous structure for birds. We've said that over and over and over again."

Dominguez said tracer lights are impractical.

"The small lights were always a possibility, but the state isn't crazy about that because the upkeep is horrendous," Dominguez said.

Changing hundreds of light bulbs, he said, would cost the state too much money and time.

Al Padilla, a Coastal Commission analyst, said supporters also believe the small tracer lights would not stand out against the brightly lit Port of Los Angeles.

Among supporters of the new design is state Assemblyman Alan Lowenthal, D-Long Beach, who managed to get \$125,000 included for the project in this year's state budget.

"They've toned it down and I think the design is more user-friendly," said Lowenthal, acknowledging that the environmental community still has problems with the proposal.

Lowenthal was instrumental in bringing together bridge lighting proponents with environmentalists after last fall's Coastal Commission

Features

