

Residents, environmentalists worried about 405 Freeway bridge plan

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Posted: 02/18/2011 04:55:18 PM PST

Updated: 02/18/2011 05:47:50 PM PST



Some residents are upset about Caltrans' plan to dismantle the Mulholland Drive bridge over the 405 Freeway and rebuild it 200 feet south. (Dean Musgrove/Staff Photographer)

A plan to tear down the existing Mulholland Drive bridge over the 405 Freeway and build a bigger one 200 feet to the south has residents and environmentalists worried about increased traffic congestion and threats to wildlife.

The new bridge is part of the \$1.03 billion freeway widening project to accommodate new carpool lanes.

Originally, Metropolitan Transportation Authority and CalTrans engineers were set to widen the Mulholland Bridge gradually, similar to the construction currently underway on the Sunset Boulevard bridge.

But engineers now say building a new bridge will save time and money, about \$3 million to \$4 million, and reduce bridge traffic during construction because the existing bridge can remain open.

Under the plan, the current Mulholland bridge would be torn down after the new one is built.

"We believe this will be less expensive to build and can be done more quickly," said Metro spokesman David Sotero. "We also are able to put in all the electronics and other equipment we want that would take longer if we are refurbishing the bridge as we go along."

Sotero said the same approach was not used for the Sunset Boulevard bridge because Metro was unable to purchase the right of way on nearby land.

Paul Edelman, deputy director of natural resources and planning for the Santa Monica Mountains Conservancy, said his agency is very concerned about the project and its impact on the Mulholland Scenic Parkway Plan.

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The plan, adopted in 1992, details what can be built in the area.

"This is the first major test of the Mulholland Scenic Parkway plan," Edelman said. "We want to learn more to see if we should ask for a further environmental review. We want to get all the details on this."

Edelman and others are concerned the new project will add to traffic, impact views, hurt wildlife and change the nature of the area.

Members of the Mulholland Scenic Parkway Design Review Board were presented with the plan on Thursday night and have asked for more information to resolve the concerns of opponents.

At the nearly four-hour meeting, Metro officials said they could meet most of the concerns involving wildlife and traffic and agreed to reduce the retaining walls being proposed.

Tom Freeman, an attorney and co-founder of the Canyon Back Alliance, a non-profit that works on issues in the Santa Monica Mountains Conservancy, said he believed the panel came up "with a set of reasonable guidelines" that would protect the area.

"Metro now has the opportunity to make this work for everyone," Freeman said.

However, a suggestion that the bridge be designed by a world-class architect drew an adamant no by Metro.

"That would be a deal-breaker," Sotero said. "And it goes against what we were told by most of the community, that they wanted a toned-down approach to the bridge."

Sotero said the presentation to the panel was the first step toward winning city approval.

"We expect to have full hearings on this and that it will be a several month process before a final decision is made," Sotero said, adding no estimate on the cost of the project has been developed yet.

"The project team is negotiating with the contractor. We expect it to save costs because of the quicker construction time and not having to work around existing traffic on a bridge."

Councilman Bill Rosendahl, who represents the area, said his staff is meeting with transit officials and residents to determine whether he will support the new bridge design.

Metro Project Director Michael Barber said the new design has been developed over the past four months in response to proposals from residents and others.

"We want to get some confidence there is support for this," Barber said.

"We have done studies showing how it will impact traffic and we think this is a better way to go."

Building the new bridge will save \$3 million to \$4

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million and also can be completed in 18 months or less compared to the 22-24 month time period for the original design.

Barber said they also believe it will have fewer traffic impacts since the existing bridge will remain open.

If local officials sign off on the project, he said construction can start almost immediately.

The Mulholland specific plan was adopted in 1992 after years of negotiations between the city and homeowner groups.

Patricia Bell Hearst, who worked on the original plan and is a member of the Hillside Federation, said she is concerned with the environmental impacts of the bridge plan.

"They are talking about moving 33,000 cubic yards of grading - that's 3,000 truckloads of grading material," Hearst said. "It will be the nightmare from hell."

Several homeowner groups also have written letters in opposition to the proposal unless a new, full environmental impact report is completed. Metro officials said they believe the new project is similar to the original proposal and will have less of an impact from stalled traffic trying to cross the bridge.