



Sierra Club's Bridge Over Troubled Waters

I was staring at my second Sierra Club membership renewal notice, going through the yearly indecision that normally ends with popping a \$40 check into the mail, when I received a call from a local Sierra Club chapter spokesman.

He telephoned to let me know that the San Diego Sierra Club decided to change course and support plans to widen the coast highway along Torrey Pines State Beach.

The same fellow also filled my weekend Inbox with several pointed emails. He was upset that my July 4 *San Diego Union Tribune* editorial advocating a full Environmental Impact Study before subjecting Helen Scripps' Torrey Pines State Park legacy to such an intrusive face-lift mistakenly described an earlier letter to the Coastal Commission.

And so, I promised to tell my readers that the San Diego Chapter of the Sierra Club now supports widening the road along Torrey Pines State Beach when the old bridge that spans Los Penasquitos Lagoon is rebuilt to safety standards because a new bridge with fewer support pillars will benefit the lagoon.

As I understand it, the local Sierra Club is in favor of the project as designed, which will add almost an acre of pavement to allow room for a third lane and 19-foot concrete retaining walls, with the condition that the road is striped for only two lanes to avoid attracting more traffic heading to Del Mar's two lane bridge up the way.

They made the decision because the city said the increased costs associated with redesigning a narrower road now that a third lane is out, or conducting an environmental study on the larger project would delay or even cause a loss of funding for replacing the outmoded bridge that hampers lagoon flushing.

Oddly enough, these same Sierra Club folks never blinked twice at adding tens of millions of dollars to the bills of private property owners and public institutions up and down the state by demanding full Environmental Impact Reports and design changes for projects with far less aesthetic and environmental impact.

But, the threat of losing a project with clear benefits to the health of the seriously impaired Los Penasquitos Lagoon convinced the local Sierra Club politburo. They sent a support letter a week before the July 9 Coastal Commission hearing to help San Diego's representatives successfully sell their project.

Soon after learning about the club's decision, several members of S.O.S. (Save Our SeaShore), the Torrey Pines Association and the Torrey Pines Planning Group, who have spent a frustrating three years trying to get the city to conduct a full environmental impact study and to grab the Sierra Club's attention, told me they were burning their Sierra Club membership cards.

This started me thinking about what I should do. Common sense says that the Sierra Club standing behind a project that will change the character of this historic area forever without demanding a proper public and environmental review smells more rotten than whatever stank in Hamlet's State of Denmark.

My first inclination was to redirect my environmental dollars to organizations that consider the people who hike, bike and ride horses part of the natural environment they serve, and by and large, try hard to keep our part of the planet looking good as well as feeling good.

Around here, there are some wonderful organizations that deserve our conservation dollars, including the San Dieguito River Valley Land Conservancy (www.sdrp.org), the Friends of Los Penasquitos Canyon Preserve (www.penasquitos.org) and the Torrey Pines Association (www.torreyprines.org), all serious stewards of their respective turf and very mindful about balancing the needs of people and plants.

But, that people perspective is what drew many of us to the Sierra Club. I remember the Sierra Club of my childhood as the plaid Pendleton-shirted people who brought conservation into our living-rooms by bringing us into the wilderness responsibly.

Although electoral politics and urban planning have become the most visible pursuits of the club lately, a look at the activities of the national Sierra Club indicates that their mission has not changed very much.

The membership director of the national Sierra Club says that people joining or renewing can designate any chapter as their home base. So, I considered renewing and finding a chapter that cares about places deeply cherished by their local communities.

As one guy at the national office reminded me, the Sierra Club is a grass roots organization of part-time volunteers. It is hard to stay mad at well-intentioned people who are often charged with making difficult choices based on highly technical information, especially with a loss of paid staff this year due to dwindling donations.

Perhaps the local club's decision to support this ugly highway project might motivate some people to onto busy days of kids, jobs and recreating along the coast to join and navigate through the arcane processes that lead to a Sierra Club chapter recommendation in case someone down there has another great idea about this area.

As for me, I send this message to the San Diego Chapter of the Sierra Club: if you believe that the City of San Diego will build a road along Torrey Pines State Beach wide enough to accommodate three lanes and only stripe for two in perpetuity, you also believe that my check is in the mail.