



MY BEST SHOT

by Lisa Ross

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HIGHWAY PROJECT CASTS SHADOW OVER LAGOON

Most people will never see Sorrento Valley Road, the green Maginot Line on the east side of Los Penasquitos Lagoon where environmentalists are entrenched in a battle on behalf of wildlife to keep the old road from reopening. Meanwhile, across the way on the west side of the lagoon, arguably the most popular historic scenic and recreational five miles along San Diego's coastline will fall victim to an unnecessary and unattractive highway widening project if the City of San Diego gets its way.

The city wants to add a third traffic lane along a 900-foot stretch of coast highway between Del Mar and Torrey Pines State Park when they reconstruct the outdated bridge spanning the mouth of Los Penasquitos Lagoon. Plans include the new 21-foot lane, a pedestrian access ramp and masonry retaining walls that will replace native vegetated sand slopes. According to a Torrey Pines Community Planning Board report, the project will blow out a historic stand of trees, cast an 8500 square foot shadow over fragile lagoon habitat and beaches, add another lane of noisy and polluting traffic and consume 25 feet of precious lagoon beach.

This, in spite of the city's own traffic analysis that concluded an additional lane will not improve traffic flows on the crowded highway. That's because the City of Del Mar, part owner of an old but historic bridge up the road, flatly refuses to encourage more traffic by building another lane when that bridge is seismically retrofitted. This means that San Diego's new three lanes, after inviting more cars to come on down from Torrey Pines mesa, will quickly merge into two as cars reach the northern bridge several hundred yards up the road.

Apparently, San Diego City officials want to build their extra lane in anticipation of a day when Del Mar residents elect a city council interested in adding more cars to the coast highway, or when Del Mar Terrace and Del Mar Heights folks elect a Torrey Pines Planning Board who want more traffic inching along Carmel Valley Road. In the face of this unlikely

scenario, reason suggests that the \$5.2 million project deserves another look.

But, the City wants to proceed with the project without full environmental review, arguing that a new bridge offers substantial environmental improvements for Los Penasquitos Lagoon and overriding public benefit. Certainly by lengthening the bridge span and reducing the number and circumference of support pillars, the mouth of the lagoon will allow better sediment discharge into the ocean, essential for improving the health of this seriously impaired wetland.

The argument apparently has proved irresistible to Torrey Pines State Park officials who so far are not opposing the widening plan that will tarnish views from and of the park. But, clearly the much needed improvements to the mouth of the lagoon do not require another traffic lane, and in fact, without complete environmental review, no one knows the extent of the environmental impacts from more cars traveling closer to the lagoon and from manufactured retaining walls.

One reason for the city's urgency might be an unintended consequence of the recent Bolsa Chica court decision, which requires that projects effecting wetlands must improve them in order to receive Coastal Commission approval, a criteria that the lane addition fails to meet on its own. So, under current state law, if the third lane was ever to be built, it would have to be now when it could be bundled with the positive benefits of the bridge project.

San Diegans deserve a full environmental review before a stunningly beautiful and historic coastal route is ruined forever. A complete Environmental Impact Report would not only settle the controversy over potential negative effects of the road widening, but more importantly would force the city to develop potential alternative plans.

It doesn't take an environmental study to understand that widening the bridge across Los Penasquitos Lagoon will bring unattractive changes to a beloved human habitat for thousands of beach visitors by mucking up a world-class view, increasing traffic noise and replacing native slopes with manufactured walls while doing nothing to improve traffic congestion on the coast.