

San Francisco Chronicle

MONDAY, APRIL 3, 2006

San Francisco Chronicle

BAY AREA AND CALIFORNIA

No land



Pave over paradise?

By Elizabeth Goldstein

Most Californians recognize that we need to invest in our highway system, but do we have to build roads through our parks?

Northern Californians should sit up and take notice because there is a proposal to do just that in Southern California. If we don't stop this project, our Bay Area state parks may well be the next target as the region struggles with traffic and congestion. There are 115 proposals affecting 73 state parks across California. Some of these proposals are extremely large, some very small, but all attempt to use our precious parkland for a purpose that was never intended.

San Onofre State Beach in Orange County is the fifth most heavily used park in the California State Park system. It is home to peaceful campgrounds. It is home to Trestles, the only surfing beach in North America on the world championship circuit. It is home to numerous archeological sites as well as Native American sacred sites. San Onofre protects Orange County's last intact natural riparian system as the clean water moves from the mountains to the sea. More than 2.5 million people use this park annually. They co-habit with the 11 threatened and endangered species there.

San Onofre also is under siege, but not from its neighbor and landlord, Camp Pendleton. San Onofre is under attack from a local transportation authority, the Eastern/Foothill Transportation Corridor Authority, whose sole purpose is to build toll roads in Orange County. It has chosen a route that would take 320 acres of parkland, *if we let them*. This is parkland that belongs to every Californian, but it is being hijacked by an agency with purely local interests. In fact, San Onofre State Beach is not situated in Orange County but in the neighboring San Diego County.

The local toll road authority hasn't just clipped a corner or proposed swapping an acre or two. It has proposed building a six-to-eight lane highway halfway up the canyon face in the heart of San Onofre and running it 4-miles long. It will be visible from the entire park. It will run within 200 feet of a popular campground. Hiking and biking trails will pass under hundreds of feet of elevated roadbed. A 200-foot sound wall will loom over the formerly tranquil San Mateo campground area.

The local toll road authority has chosen this route because it claims that the other "built environment" alternatives are infeasible. Some of the alternatives clearly are infeasible, as they would cut an untenable swath through existing cities. However, the local toll road authority also eliminated an alternative that would widen the I-5 highway and improve street connections to it. That alternative actually worked out better than another proposed route, including the one that passes through San Onofre, in the agency's own traffic modeling. Why did that get eliminated?

The local toll road authority claims that it is infeasible because it is too expensive. Of course, there is no cost anywhere in their equations for the loss of a state park. A strong coalition of environmental groups, including us at the California State Parks Foundation, Surfrider Foundation, the Sierra Club, the Natural Resources Defense Council, the Endangered Habitats League, Sea and Sage Audubon and the Laguna Greenbelt, Inc., have said "no" to this toll road and have filed lawsuit to

block it.

Attorney General Lockyer has also filed two lawsuits, one on behalf of the people of California and the other on behalf of the State Parks and Recreation Commission. The other suit was filed on behalf of the Native American Heritage Commission. All three lawsuits challenge the Environmental Impact Report findings. But if these lawsuits succeed, they will only serve to throw out the EIR and force the transportation-corridor authority to start the environmental process all over again.

Our great State Parks System has its roots firmly planted in citizen protection efforts that stretch back a century and a half. We must recognize that developers will drive right through our parks if we don't stand firm. Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger cares about the environment. He can give us all hope that parks are an environmental issue and *not* a partisan one.

If the governor stands up to the toll road agency and says, "State parks are protected land for the next generation, take your highway somewhere else," he will not stand alone. Sixty-nine percent of likely voters in a recent poll conducted by Fairbank, Maslin, Mauldin & Associates indicated that they oppose highways impinging on state parks.

The remarkable thing about this statistic is, whether Republican or Democrat, young or old, or rich or poor, building toll roads through parks strikes most as a very bad idea. The question is, now that we have spoken, is anyone listening?

The toll road authority is not listening. It believes it doesn't have to. But California creates state parks to protect them, not to pave them. We have environmental and coastal-protection laws that, if enforced, can stop this destructive project. We must demand that the state, which created this local toll road authority in the first place, do just that — now.

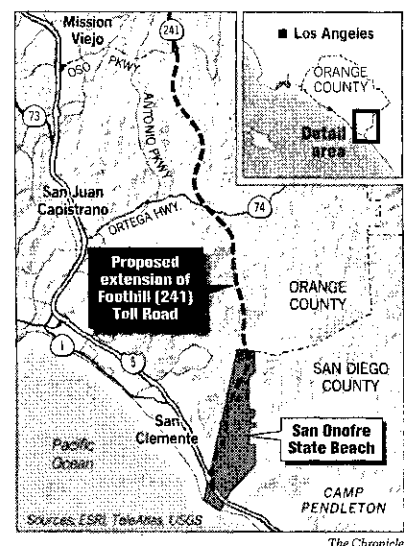
Elizabeth Goldstein is the president of the California State Parks Foundation.

Take action

Write Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger: E-mail governor@governor.ca.gov

Write your state legislator: To find out how to contact your individual senator or Assembly member, go to www.leginfo.ca.gov/yourleg.html and type in your ZIP code.

Write the Foothill/Eastern Transportation Corridor Agency: 209 Avenida Del Mar, Suite 102, San Clemente, CA 92672



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