

A sharp U-turn on Mulholland

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The Mulholland Bridge, completed in 1960, will be demolished and rebuilt. Caltrans photo

In the end, it was a bridge too far.

A **short-lived plan** to build a new Mulholland Bridge before tearing down the existing one as part of the **I-405 Sepulveda Pass project** has been scrapped, less than six months after it was announced to cheers from many in the project's Community Advisory Committee. Project officials instead are reverting to their original plan of demolishing and rebuilding the existing bridge in two stages—although that's expected to be costlier and more disruptive to traffic.

It's also expected to take longer. Mike Barbour, who's heading up the project for Metro, says that even though the freeway project as a whole remains on track to largely finish by May or June, 2013, the about-face will likely delay the Mulholland Bridge's reopening for up to three months.

The change of plans comes after a Los Angeles city design review board weighed in on the project, asking for modifications and pushing Metro to go back to the drawing board to create an "extraordinary," visually striking redesign of the bridge.

At the same time, the Brentwood Residents Coalition filed a series of objections to the project, arguing that the new-bridge plan would hurt the Mulholland corridor's scenic quality and violate the California Environmental Quality Act if it went forward without a comprehensive environmental review. Letters expressing concern also came from the Bel Air Skycrest Property Owners Association and the Santa Monica Mountains Conservancy.

Their concerns included fears that the new configuration would interfere with the wildlife corridor around the bridge and break up Mulholland Drive by creating a "T-intersection" at the bridge, chopping the road into two segments. The creation of an all-new Mulholland Bridge would break "the sinuous, continuous line of the beautiful and historic mother road," Lois Becker, president of the Bel Air Skycrest group, wrote in a letter to the city's Mulholland Scenic Parkway Specific Plan Design Review Board.

Toni Lewis, an architect on the design review board, said members had not set out to block the new-bridge plan and had made reasonable recommendations to Metro that could have been worked through.

The look of the proposed new bridge, developed in consultation with the project's Community Advisory Committee, had been intended to mimic the existing structure, **completed in 1960**. But Lewis said too little consideration had been given to designing something better to benefit one of the city's landmark roadways.

"This is something that's important and we're treating it like the overpass at Overland, which it's not," she said. "I just thought that it was a total missed opportunity to leave something [the city] could be proud of."

Metro said the design panel's recommendations, along with concerns that it might be sued by the residents' coalition, prompted it to reverse course rather than confront potential delays in court and in the design process.

"Unfortunately, we don't have the luxury of time," Yvette Rapose, Metro's community relations manager for the project, said in a Feb. 25 letter to interested parties. Her letter said the agency was doing so even though it was confident that it had been on "firm legal ground" and would have prevailed in a court fight.

The \$1.034 billion project is a Metro-Caltrans collaboration to add a 10-mile northbound carpool lane to the 405, along with other improvements. As part of the design-build process, Metro has been regularly meeting with the project's Community Advisory Committee, made up of representatives from residents' groups in the surrounding areas.

The idea of minimizing disruption by building a new Mulholland Bridge before knocking down the old one grew out of a meeting with community members last summer, and was supported by many on the advisory committee, particularly those from Encino and Sherman Oaks.

"I think it's unfortunate that the best solution didn't come out of the process," said Barbour, who'd previously estimated that the new-bridge approach on Mulholland could have saved from \$4 million to \$10 million. He said the majority of the project's advisory committee members had favored the construction of a new bridge. "A lot of people were supportive. They just weren't as vocal as the people who were non-supportive."

"The long and the short of it is: here we are back at square one," said Laurie Kelson, a member of the Community Advisory Committee, as well as vice president of the Encino Neighborhood Council and chair of its traffic and transportation committee. Kelson had supported the idea of building a new bridge before tearing down the old as a better way to ensure good emergency response times in the heavily-traveled area and to lessen the overall traffic impact of construction.

She said the process should have given more weight to the opinions of those who live closest to the affected area. "There's something wrong with the process," she said. Community representatives from "each segment of this project should really be making the more important decisions about their segment."

Since the challenge to the new-bridge plan also came from within the Community Advisory Committee, there have been some tensions within the group. But nobody seems to feel that any bridges have been permanently burned. "Did I wish they never started this? Absolutely," Kelson said, of the committee's dissenters to the plan. "But certainly there are a lot of good people to work with."

Wendy-Sue Rosen, a member of the Community Advisory Committee and also president of the Brentwood Residents Coalition, which challenged the new-bridge plan, predicted that the advisory committee would be able to put the differences of opinion behind them.

"We are all strong advocates and disagreement is part of the process. But we pull together when necessary for a common goal," Rosen said in an e-mail. "I don't think that the differences of opinion over the Mulholland Bridge will make it harder to work collaboratively with each other or with Metro to ensure the project moves forward in the least disruptive manner."