

Los Angeles Times

Alternative Mulholland Drive bridge plan could have saved money, lessened traffic woes

A rejected proposal for rebuilding the bridge could have saved anywhere from \$4 million to \$10 million and reduced the likelihood of serious traffic jams.



The Mulholland Drive bridge along the northbound 405 Freeway. An alternative plan would have required shutting down the 405 for only one weekend instead of two. (Gary Friedman, Los Angeles Times / June 6, 2011)

By Sam Allen and Ari Bloomekatz, Los Angeles Times

July 10, 2011

For all the dread over the impending closure of the 405 Freeway, a significant amount of the disruption — and millions of dollars in extra costs — could have been avoided by an alternative plan that was blocked by a group of residents who raised aesthetic and other objections.

Now, hundreds of thousands of drivers face the possibility of epic traffic jams when the 405 is shut down next weekend and again next summer for the demolition of the Mulholland Drive bridge. And local residents will also pay the price: Mulholland Drive, which would have remained at four lanes under the alternative plan, will be reduced to two lanes for the next two years.

Officials said the discarded construction plan was developed specifically to lessen the blow of the bridge construction project, part of a \$1-billion effort to widen the 405 freeway.

In February, the Metropolitan Transportation Authority and the California Department of Transportation presented a design scheme that would have built a new, realigned bridge before tearing down the old one. The plan won strong support from city and county leaders, who said it was more efficient, less costly and quicker than the original plan, which called for demolishing and rebuilding the existing bridge in two phases.

The alternative plan would have required shutting down the 405 for only one weekend instead of two.

But property owners in the tony hillside neighborhoods straddling the Sepulveda Pass rose up against the concept. They argued the less costly bridge and road design were not in keeping with Mulholland Drive's "unique and distinctly rustic character." Historic preservation groups sought an environmental impact report for the alternative design.

At one point, members of the Mulholland Scenic Parkway Design Review Board requested that transportation officials hire a "world-class" architect to design a new landmark bridge for the area.

"I think the community deserves something special," review board member and Woodland Hills resident Jack Dawson said in an interview Friday.

But officials at Caltrans and Metro, under pressure to complete the project by 2013, [said they didn't have time](#) to rework the bridge plans for a third time. So, they went back to the original concept. No new architect was hired. And the original bridge design—a fairly utilitarian concrete span that looks similar to the existing bridge—was not changed.

"I was pretty disappointed," said Mike Barbour, Metro's project director for the I-405 Sepulveda Pass Widening Project. "We were kind of like, 'Guys, what do you do? Do you keep fighting when you've got at least a handful of activists that are going to cause all these troubles, and you've got the Mulholland Design Review Board that's wanting some incredible, some ridiculous thing?'"

Dawson countered that his panel would have considered approving the alternate plan had Metro returned at a subsequent meeting and told the group it could not afford a more elaborate bridge. But Metro, he said, decided on its own to go back to the old plan.

Transportation officials estimated the alternative alignment could have saved \$4 million to \$10 million and between six months to a year of work. Approximately 40% of those savings would have come from cheaper demolition costs. Metro would also have had to do less temporary relocation of utilities. The rejected bridge design would have been slightly shorter than the existing one, Barbour said, meaning savings on construction materials and labor.

Planners considered pushing ahead with the alternative proposal, despite the opposition. But that course was deemed impractical because it could have required additional studies and promoted lawsuits that could have tied up the project indefinitely.

"It just wasn't worthwhile at that point," Barbour said.

Ironically, the unsuccessful plan supported by transportation officials was developed partly as a result of neighborhood concerns about the disruptions that would accompany any freeway shutdowns.

The first plans to rebuild the Mulholland Drive bridge were approved in 2008, after it was decided the existing structure had to go to make way for new carpool lanes being added to the 405.

The Community Advisory Committee, a panel of Westside and Valley neighborhood representatives set up by Metro that monitors the project, found drawbacks in the plan. Members were particularly concerned about the length of time the 405 would have to be shut down. The committee was enthusiastic when officials presented the alternative plan. But the new proposal drew a flurry of opposition letters from a smaller group of neighborhood groups in areas including Bel-Air Sky Crest and Brentwood.

Wendy-Sue Rosen, one of the activists against the alternative plan, said residents felt there wasn't enough data on its environmental impacts or on the road closures that would have been required.

Another key issue, she said, was a change in Mulholland Drive itself: The new bridge would have created a "T" intersection on the east side of the bridge in place of a gradual curve in the original plan.

Rosen's group, the Brentwood Residents Coalition, [complained in a letter](#) that the realigned bridge would "degrade the historic alignment and scenic character of the Mulholland Scenic Parkway."

The letter also hinted at legal action, stating that, because it lacked a new environmental impact report, the alternative plan was "an egregious violation" of state regulations.

At a tense public meeting on Feb. 17, Barbour pitched the new plan to the Design Review Board, a city committee made up of local residents that reviews new construction projects along Mulholland Drive.

Dozens of residents spoke in opposition to the new plan. The board members — three of whom are architects — questioned whether the city was missing an opportunity to create a new civic landmark.

Zev Yaroslavsky, who represents the area on the Los Angeles County Board of Supervisors, supported the alternative plan. But he said Metro could not risk a new lawsuit that would stall the project. So he agreed with the decision to push ahead with the original plan.

"As frustrating as it was to many of us, myself included, Metro made the right decision," said Yaroslavsky, whose staff has been chronicling the debate on his [website](#). "They couldn't jeopardize the length of the project by a year or two."

Laurie Kelson, a member of the Community Advisory Committee, said she was "majorly disappointed" that the alternative plan wasn't adopted.

"We all worked really hard on this, it was a great idea that would have saved millions of taxpayer dollars," she said. "And it's not happening, it's gone."

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