



CITY OF GLENDALE, CALIFORNIA REPORT TO THE CITY COUNCIL

AGENDA ITEM

Report: Request for letter opposing Griffith Park Tram

1. Motion authorizing the Interim City Manager to prepare and send a letter in opposition to the Griffith Park Tram.

COUNCIL ACTION

Item Type: Action Item

Approved for February 02, 2021 **calendar**

ADMINISTRATIVE ACTION

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Approved by:

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RECOMMENDATION

Staff is seeking Council direction on a request to oppose the Griffith Park Aerial Tramway project in adjacent Los Angeles.

BACKGROUND/ANALYSIS

At the request of the Friends of Griffith Park, the City Council directed staff to prepare an item for consideration on whether to submit a letter of opposition to the Griffith Park Aerial Tramway that is currently undergoing a feasibility study. The following report provides a brief background and identifies preliminary studies that have been prepared to date on the project.

Beginning in the Summer of 2015, Dixon Resources Unlimited (DIXON) worked with the City of Los Angeles Department of Recreation and Parks to develop the Griffith Park Transportation and Parking Action Plan. The project focused on circulation improvements that would reduce congestion and improve access in and around Griffith Park. During this time, the City of Los Angeles Department of Transportation (LADOT), Transit Services DASH and Metro expanded shuttle service into the Park. The schedule has since been expanded to provide daily service carrying visitors from the Red Line to the Greek Theatre and the Griffith Observatory. The change in traffic patterns has improved traffic flow and access, allowing DASH to provide reliable service.

In March of 2017, the Los Angeles City Council approved Councilmember David Ryu's request for a comprehensive study for improving access, safety, and mobility in and around Griffith Park and around the Hollywood Sign. Ultimately, DIXON was retained to prepare a comprehensive access and mobility study that began in July of 2017.

In conjunction with this Comprehensive Strategies Report (CSR), often referred to as the Dixon Report, DIXON completed a separate Data Analysis Report. The Data Analysis Report discusses the data collection methodologies and includes the data analysis results from each round of data collection. Some of the data analysis results are referenced in the CSR (Dixon Report) to support the recommended strategies.

Overview of Dixon Report

Before considering the subject project, it is important to understand how the City of Los Angeles came up with the project and their objective for its development.

The Comprehensive Strategies Report is based on and organized around seven main goals meant to improve access, mobility, and safety in and around Griffith Park and the Hollywood Sign. For each goal, there are several potential strategies for consideration. These strategies each include a suggested implementation timeline, organized into short-, mid- and long-term steps. They were developed based upon a series of site visits, extensive stakeholder feedback, data analysis results, and industry best practices. They include:

1. Enhance Pedestrian Safety;
2. Improve Traffic Flow and Reduce Congestion;

3. Improve Access to Griffith Park and Trailheads;
4. Improve Emergency Vehicle Access;
5. Increase Parking Efficiency and Compliance Rates;
6. Expand Transit Opportunities; and
7. Actively Manage and Provide Optimized Visitor Opportunities.

Each strategy within the goals were assigned either low, medium, or high priority. The relative cost is also identified for each strategy from \$ to \$\$\$\$\$. Their prioritization is based upon the estimated costs versus the potential benefits. This has been gauged through a mix of extensive stakeholder outreach, data analysis, industry best practices, and prior experience. Ultimately, the Public and Los Angeles City Council review, environmental analyses, engineering evaluations, and cost appraisals, among other factors, will influence whether a strategy is viable, its prioritization, and a feasible timeline for implementation. A copy of the Dixon Report is attached as Exhibit A. No CEQA analysis was prepared as part of the Dixon Report.

Feasibility Study

Stantec was selected by the City of Los Angeles Department of Recreation and Parks to prepare a feasibility study of an Aerial Transit System (ATS) aimed at alleviating congestion and increasing mobility in and around Los Angeles' famed Griffith Park. The ATS was included as Strategy #3 of Goal 3 (Improve Access to Griffith Park and Trailheads) of the Dixon Report. The feasibility study, completed in the summer of 2020, serves as a tool to allow informed decision-making on whether to move an ATS forward for Griffith Park. A copy of the feasibility study fact sheet is attached as Exhibit B.

In an effort to reduce traffic and aid the safe mobility of visitors, the feasibility study included the following primary tasks and topic areas:

- Analysis of the potential transit and mobility pros and cons of an ATS: An estimation of potential ridership demand and analysis of existing mobility platforms.
- Description and analysis of ATS technology and best practices: A description of the available technologies, an analysis of their operations and maintenance needs and costs, and a description and comparison of currently operating ATS in other urban areas.
- Definition and analysis of proposed alignment alternatives: Considerations for the start, landing stations and viewing area(s), including a viewing area of the famed Hollywood Sign—and potential impacts on the surrounding wildlife and community.
- Analysis of the reliability and safety of the ATS: Focused on the potential effects of the ATS on patron safety and on local emergency services, and the benefits it would provide park patrons.
- Community engagement/relations: The initiation, organization and management of a close-knit relationship with the community interested in the project through regular community meetings to update stakeholders and incorporate their feedback in the study.

- Assessment of the financial feasibility: An analysis of the financial requirements of the project, the potential funding sources and ridership fees.

Potential Routes Examined

The project team, led by the engineering firm Stantec, has evaluated four different alignments for the tram, all of which would originate from the San Fernando Valley side of the park and run to a new viewing platform located roughly 400 feet below the Hollywood Sign. Routes examined in the study were based on existing park conditions, uses and constraints. Exhibit C shows the four routes reviewed in the feasibility study that include:

Route 1: Travel Town

Route 2: L.A. Zoo Parking

Route 3: L.A. Zoo Magnet

Route 4: Warner Brothers

Route 1 would originate from Travel Town, the railroad museum at the park's northwest corner. Starting from the museum, which is home to a popular miniature railroad, the tram route would run south toward the Griffith Observatory, before veering west toward the Hollywood Sign viewing platform station. This route would require the construction of 21 towers and offer a trip time of 12 minutes. While the Travel Town route is considered to have the best terrain and easiest crossing of the power lines that cut through Griffith Park, this route could impact several sensitive vegetation and wildlife areas.

Routes 2 and 4 in the study would both originate from the L.A. Zoo campus, located along the northeast side of Griffith Park. Each would require the construction of 24 towers and offer a roughly 12-to-13-minute trip.

Both Routes 2 and 3 offer proximity to the I-5 Freeway and large parking lots, but would require a costly crossing of the power lines which cut through the park, and may also conflict with future expansion plans for the zoo.

Route 4, which was added to the study after the initial outreach period, would originate from property owned by Warner Bros. Studios along the far west side of the park. Route 4 is the shortest and fastest route under consideration with a trip time of roughly 6 minutes. The potential benefits include a potential partnership with Warner Bros, although issues of terrain could lead to higher construction costs, and the location of the viewing platform would result in visual impacts to the Hollywood Sign.

Ridership forecasts posted to the project website anticipate robust use of the proposed gondola system. Estimates for off-peak usage range from 3,000 passengers to more than 8,000. Estimates from Peak days' range from more than 4,000 to as many as 13,000. The ridership forecasts rely heavily on the expectation of inexpensive fares, ample parking, and some induced demand.

The project's feasibility study, which is ongoing, will look at its potential to reduce traffic congestion, while also exploring engineering, environmental, and financial hurdles.

Cited Concerns

While the project is in the early stages of study and no environmental review has been conducted, several agencies and organizations have identified potential impacts and expressed opposition to the project. The Friends of Griffith Park, Sierra Club, Los Angeles Audubon Society (Exhibit D), and the City of Burbank (Exhibit E) have all voiced their opinion in opposition to the project. Areas of potential impact that may result from the project and are listed below include those identified in the letters and newspaper articles from the Los Angeles Times and Spectrum News.

Burbank notes that there are more than 2,000 horses living in and around Griffith Park, including those in Glendale and Burbank. These communities have a rich equestrian history of over 100 years, especially in the Rancho neighborhood(s) of our two cities. Hundreds of horses are also routinely transported to the Park for equestrian events, shows, trail riding, and exercising. Trail access is vital for these residents, riders and horses. Route #1 of the proposed tramway originating from Travel Town may result in the loss of Martinez Arena, which would eliminate a critically important equestrian facility that would sever access to the extensive equestrian trail network in the Park. Burbank's opposition letter further states that "The Griffith Park area is one of the very few places for equestrians to ride in the region and loss of equestrian access to the park would irrevocably harm Burbank's equestrian neighborhood". To the extent Glendale's equestrian community uses the same access, it would be subject to the same potential impacts.

According to the Los Angeles Audubon Society, there are almost 300 species of birds that have been recorded in Griffith Park, ranking it as one of the most avian biodiverse urban parks in the world. Their stated concern is "...that an aerial tram cutting across two miles through the middle of the park, with a viewing platform on Mount Lee, will without question irreversibly degrade unique native habitat that many of these bird species require to persist".

After carefully studying the four aerial tram routes, Friends of Griffith Park opposes all the routes identified in the feasibility study for the following reasons:

- The proposed project would inevitably lead to permanent destruction of open space, habitat, and wildlife.
- The stated purpose of the aerial tram (transit) is simply a pretense for further development into this urban wilderness, while previously suggested alternatives that would aid in the reduction of tourist traffic and associated problems are not being pursued.
- This massive infrastructure undertaking will lead to large-scale closures of parts of the Park to hikers, equestrians and other park users during a long, expensive construction period.

- Col. Griffith's gift to Los Angeles of a preserved wilderness space in close proximity to a growing urban space would be dishonored and could affect the good intentions of other philanthropists in the future.
- The project is in conflict with the Vision Plan and the Historical-Cultural Monument designations which might render both obsolete.

Additional comments of concern that have been voiced on various community websites are listed below.

- While some development exists around the outskirts of the park, the center is relatively untouched, and remains a haven for both hikers and wildlife alike, including the famous mountain lion P-22. Implementation of the project could jeopardize that condition and encourage further development within the park.
- The construction of the ATS would mean long term closures of many hiking trails and areas within the Park and will be a disruption for the those who use the park daily.
- An aerial tram cutting across two miles through the middle of the park, with a viewing platform on Mount Lee near the Hollywood Sign would permanently scar this unique, urban wilderness.
- Wildlife patterns would be altered and native habitat destroyed forever.
- Environmental issues surrounding the towers to support the gondola and the potential impacts associated with vegetation and wildlife.
- None of the proposed routes would have access to public transit and therefore would not solve the issue of parking and traffic through the park and Hollywood sign, which is one of the main reasons for building the gondolas.

Although not a position of opposition, State Senator Anthony Portantino's office did prepare a letter (Exhibit F) requesting clarifications about the project that would better define areas of potential impact and or mitigations resulting from the tramway project. His letter requests additional information or study on many of the same areas cited by opposing agencies and organizations.

It is important to note the objections and potential impacts listed above have been identified without the benefit of formal environmental review. Some of the impacts and opinions of position do not need formal review to know they may exist; however, their severity and the opportunity for mitigation have not yet been studied.

FISCAL IMPACT

There is no fiscal impact to the City associated with this item.

ALTERNATIVES

Alternative 1: City Council can direct staff to prepare a letter in opposition to the tramway to include feedback discussed at today's meeting.

Alternative 2: City Council can direct staff to prepare a letter expressing concern about potential impacts asking for additional information and or study of areas of concern.

Alternative 3: City Council can direct staff to follow progress and next steps of tramway waiting until more detailed information is available including complete CEQA review to comment on project.

Alternative 4: City Council can direct staff to take no action meaning staff will not mail a letter opposing the tramway.

Alternative 5: City Council can consider any alternative not proposed by staff.

EXHIBITS

1. Exhibit A – Dixon Report
2. Exhibit B – Fact Sheet
3. Exhibit C – Map of Tram Routes
4. Exhibit D – Opposition Letter from Los Angeles Audubon Society
5. Exhibit E – Opposition letter from City of Burbank
6. Exhibit F – Letter from State Senator Anthony Portantino's Office