

Desert Hot Springs withholds support of Whitewater River trail

City wants discussion on how \$53M should be spent

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Written by

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DESERT HOT SPRINGS — Eight of the Coachella Valley's nine cities have joined dozens of other agencies to ask for state money to study a proposed 54-mile paved trail along the Whitewater River.

But two Desert Hot Springs councilmen have adamantly resisted signing onto the study, and instead want to notify South Coast Air Quality Management District that they want \$15 million of the \$53 million in air quality money to go directly to their city.

Councilmen Russell Betts and Adam Sanchez said Tuesday they want to slow down discussions about a valleywide path, stake claim to the money now and “open up a dialogue” about how it should be spent.

After a contentious hour of discussion, the City Council voted 3-2 Tuesday to alert the air quality district of its intentions. It also plans to host community meetings to solicit proposals for how to spend the money.

“I would think the same city that ended up costing the valley \$1 million would be very careful and not want to rush into things,” Betts said, referring to the cost to other valley cities when Desert Hot Springs officials balked at joining a multiple-species habitat protection plan more than five years ago.

Mayor Pro Tem Jan Pye voted with Betts and Sanchez to send the letter to South Coast. Mayor Yvonne Parks said she supports the bike path in concept and voted with Councilman Scott Matas against the motion.

Parks said Desert Hot Springs cannot make the same mistake this time as it did with the multi-species plan.

Citing potential impacts on planned city developments, Desert Hot Springs city leaders in 2006 abruptly opted out of the 75-year, \$2.2 billion valleywide plan aimed at preserving land and habitat.

Its objections forced valley officials, who had negotiated for a decade, to spend \$1.2 million to revise the plan and take it to each city for another approval.

Desert Hot Springs officials later reversed course and had to pay more than \$250,000 to have the multi-species plan reworked so they could join it.

“We need to play fair in the sandbox” this time, Parks said Tuesday.

At least some of the money for the proposed bike path could come out of the \$53 million designated to the valley this month by South Coast.

It comes from the owners of the Sentinel Power Plant, an 800-megawatt, natural gas-powered facility being built north of Interstate 10 near the wind turbines west of Desert Hot Springs.

The law requires that at least 30 percent of the mitigation fund be spent within 6 miles of the plant. That includes almost all of Desert Hot Springs, as well as about a dozen other agencies — including Mission Springs Water District, Palm Springs and Riverside County.

Earlier this month, Coachella Valley Association of Governments Executive Director Tom Kirk submitted a grant application to the state to pay for a feasibility study on the bike path.

He had letters of support from more than 40 agencies, from Eisenhower Medical Center to the Coachella Valley Economic Partnership to the eight valley cities other than Desert Hot Springs.

“My guess is we'll have more and broader support for this project than just about any project in the state of California,” Kirk said.

Betts and Sanchez instructed City Manager Rick Daniels not to send a letter of support, which was due by the Feb. 15 grant application deadline. They want to open it to public comment, they told him in an email exchange obtained by The Desert Sun.

Daniels will instead present the issue to the City Council at its March 6 meeting.

Desert Hot Springs' decision not to sign on to the grant application should not damage a proposal that has already won wide support, Kirk said.

Stressing that the grant application pays only for a feasibility study and does not yet endorse construction, Kirk said the study is not rushed.

It's further evaluating what seems to be a very promising idea but certainly has a number of questions. I don't think it's premature to ask questions,” Kirk said.

Desert Hot Springs resident Lorraine Becker, president of the Cabot's Pueblo Museum, commended Betts and Sanchez for initiating the discussion. She urged the city to be conscious of how it's perceived to other cities while it advocates for air quality projects.

“This could be a game- changer, not only for this city but for the entire valley as we keep up with the competition and look at the long-term economic benefits,” she said.

The regional air quality board, which represents nearly 17 million people across Southern California, will spend the next four months determining how best to divide the fund.

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View Comments

- Haddon Libby

Doesn't the Valley have greater needs than this cart path? I would use the money to mitigate the high unemployment rates. Tom Flavin at CVEP would be a good one to involve in discussions. Invest in business creating jobs, make loans to small businesses starved for capital. Those are far better uses of the money than a cart path in these rough economic times.

Donna Chaban-Delmas

I totally agree, Haddon. In this economy, it is a waste of funds that could be earmarked for more critical need.

Benjamin Daniels · [Indio, California](#)

Yeah, but how would someone's pet project get funded if it were not for the "people's" money. Why use your own money when someone else can flip the bill!

[Eve Guillot](#)

The interesting thing about this whole project is that the first flash flood will wipe it all out.

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Finally, there is one desert city with saner heads.