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Resolution On Proposed Griffith Park Aerial Tram/Skyway

The Angeles Chapter Conservation Committee recommends that the Angeles Chapter Executive Committee adopt a resolution to oppose the recent proposal by Warner Bros. Studio to build an aerial “skyway” to take riders from its property in Burbank to the top of Mt. Lee in Griffith Park, behind the Hollywood Sign, and to also oppose other proposed aerial trams into the Park.

Background:

In 1896, Colonel Griffith donated the Park to the citizens of Los Angeles as “a place of recreation and rest for the masses.” He envisioned the Park as an oasis for residents and visitors to reconnect with nature. Today the Park is used by a diverse set of Angelenos, for hiking, bicycling, picnicking, and more. The Park is also the largest natural wilderness within the City of Los Angeles parks department, containing a diverse ecosystem that houses a substantial number of native plant and animal species who rely on it to survive, including the world famous urban mountain lion, “P-22”. The Park is designated a Significant Ecological Area by the County of Los Angeles General Plan and a wildlife corridor linking the Santa Monica Mountains to the Verdugo Mountain range. It is considered one of 34 biodiversity hotspots for conservation worldwide by Conservation International. As such, the Park requires special consideration whenever its flora and fauna are threatened.

Previous proposals for aerial trams in the Park have been criticized by environmentalists and others. In 2005, a draft of a Griffith Park Master Plan including two proposed aerial trams was widely criticized for how it would despoil and commercialize the Park. The Griffith Park Working Group, created in response to that plan, ultimately asserted that the Park should maintain its Urban Wilderness Identity. However, the 2018 Dixon Report (“Comprehensive Strategies Report: Improving Access, Safety, and Mobility Around Griffith Park & the Hollywood Sign”), commissioned by Councilmember Ryu’s office, mentions the possibility of an aerial tram from one of several locations in the north or northeast parts of the Park (the Headworks Reservoir, the LA Zoo, and the Wilson and Harding Golf Course) to a Hollywood Sign viewing platform somewhere in the park. In a June 2018 written evaluation of the Dixon Report strategies, Recreation and Parks General Manager Mike Shull and City Council Legislative Analyst Sharon Tso rated the aerial tram strategy as feasible, seemed to think it would help alleviate traffic in neighborhoods south of the park, and even appear to propose building an aerial tram in a location not mentioned in the Dixon Report.

In early July 2018, Warner Bros. Studio proposed spending \$100 million to build an aerial “skyway” to take ticket holders from its studio property in Burbank to Mt. Lee, in Griffith Park, upon which rests the world famous Hollywood sign. This aerial tram would be built through Griffith Park and require a visitors center to be built atop Mt. Lee, where currently hikers, cyclists, and horseback riders can sit, rest, and contemplate the view of Los Angeles below.

Warner Bros. proposes splitting the ticket fees with the City of Los Angeles. One of the arguments made by Warner Bros. in favor of the tram is that it would reduce congestion in the Hollywood caused by tourists attempting to see and photograph the Hollywood Sign. Warner Bros. Studio cites the Dixon Report as support for its proposal.

Arguments For:

Surrounded by a bustling urban area, Griffith Park provides an oasis for an increasingly stressed ecosystem. An aerial tramway would carry an increased number of visitors into a relatively remote section of the park, requiring a large amount of new infrastructure to support them and the tram itself, all dramatically increasing pressure on this critical wildlife habitat. This influx of visitors—including ones with little experience in a wilderness area—would likely result in litter, accidents, and increased fire risk in the Park. If the goal is to alleviate the burden of traffic on area neighborhoods, that burden shouldn't be shifted into the Park and onto the wildlife that depend on it.

Whether or not a tramway would solve the problem of tourist traffic in nearby neighborhoods is uncertain. The Warner Bros' proposed "skyway" proposes an approach to the Hollywood Sign from the Burbank (north) side of the Park to Mt. Lee that would deliver park guests to an area just above the back of the Sign. This would not offer the many visitors the frontal view of the Sign they want for their photos. As such, an aerial tram from the north of the Park would probably do little to relieve the congestion and damage that visitors inflict on residential neighborhoods south of Griffith Park.

There are, in fact, a number of options that would simultaneously address the congestion in the neighborhoods south of the park, while giving visitors the photo shot they want. Some are mentioned in the Dixon Report. One promising strategy mentioned is having electric shuttles take visitors from a Metro station through the currently shuttered Beachwood Gate, giving visitors access to the shortest hiking route to the Sign. Other simple strategies in the report include extending DASH shuttle service to Sign-related trailheads, increasing traffic and parking efficiency, and collaborating with Google and Waze to communicate more accurate information. In addition, a Hollywood Sign Visitors' Center and viewing platform could be created in Hollywood, perhaps atop a commercial building. All of these alternatives would help meet neighborhood concerns while preserving the natural environment of the park.

Finally, there is an intrinsic environmental justice element associated with the monetization of the public Griffith Park by a private entity. Currently, the Park is free and accessible to all Angelenos. Converting a free, open, and wild section of the Park into an attraction only available to those with the means to purchase tickets, chips away at the communal abundance of the Park, intended for all of us to enjoy, at no charge.

Arguments Against: Griffith Park is already commercialized with a zoo, museum, and golf course. P-22 is an aberration, and is not in need of protection. Since a portion of the ticket price will go to the City, the tram will add to city coffers. A tram may alleviate some of the tourist traffic on the southside of Mt. Lee.