

California Coastal Commission Shows Support For Adding Bike Path To New Gerald Desmond Bridge

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To appease concerns raised by the community, members of the California Coastal Commission, at their January 14 meeting at Long Beach City Hall, expressed strong support in favor of adding a bike and pedestrian pathway to plans for replacing the Gerald Desmond Bridge.

During public comment, bicycle advocates asked the commission to require the nearly \$1 billion project to include a bike and pedestrian pathway when the Port of Long Beach comes before the commission for permits in the next few months. Commissioners said they would support the speakers' requests, but have not taken any action yet.

"In response to the substantial public comment regarding bicycle and pedestrian access, I think they are absolutely spot on," Commissioner Ross Mirkarimi said. "I hope that the comments here today are well-heard by the port and by the City of Long Beach so that when it comes before us, it's not considered a footnote just how important the installation of bike and pedestrian access is in the larger schematic [plans]."

Fears have been circulating from community leaders and city councilmembers that plans may fall through if the port and Caltrans don't express further commitment of adding a bike path since no formal mandate is on the books yet. While most environmental clearances and funding have already been secured, port officials estimate adding bike/pedestrian access

would cost around \$50 million, which staff hasn't expressed full funding for yet.

Art Wong, Port of Long Beach spokesperson, told the Business Journal that the port has already assured the city council that plans would include a bike/pedestrian path, but it would be premature to speculate about anything else until the Request For Proposals (RFP) is released in coming months. Only about 15 percent of the bridge design has been drawn out and a majority of the design is being done by whichever firm is awarded the "design/build" contract, he said.

"We're definitely going to include it in the Request For Proposals and that's the stage we're at now," Wong said. "We're putting together the specs for that and over the next couple of months we'll solicit proposals . . . I don't know what more we can do at this point."

At a previous meeting, Coastal Commission Executive Director Peter Douglas said incorporating a bike path might cost more money down the line, but commission staff would recommend appealing the port's request for permits if the plans aren't included.

Mark Bixby, a cycling enthusiast and bike festival organizer, led the group of bike advocates present at the coastal commission meeting. He is in favor of the commission approving permits for the new bridge, but only if there is a bike path and pedestrian walkway for travelers to view the coast, and for future access to San Pedro. "We are in support of this request, but we want you to approve that permit with the condition that it does include bike and pedestrian [access] and

hopefully the port will do that in a fashion that is deserving of a billion dollar brand new infrastructure project."

Allan Crawford, local bike advocate and colleague of Bixby, said federal, state and regional agencies already mandate that any such large infrastructure projects should include bike or pedestrian access as governments work to transform the landscape for future alternative transportation efforts. He added that currently there are 16,000 employees at the Port of Long Beach and 6,000 workers on Terminal Island, along with 12,000 boat slips in Wilmington – all of which would benefit from a bike/pedestrian pathway.

Doug Houghton, general manager of Seattle-based Harley Marine Services, a leaseholder on Terminal Island with a 15-year term, echoed the sentiment. He said the tugboat marine transportation company is already moving forward with installing showers and amenities for its 100 workers using alternative means of transportation as part of construction for a new multi-million-dollar facility. At the company's homeport in Seattle, Houghton said many port employees have already made biking their primary mode of transportation to and from work. "At 7 in the morning, when it's still dark there, you see little red lights blinking; cyclists on their way to the port," he said. "It's a lot colder and a lot darker up there, but they are using it. It's a part of their culture and a means to get exercise." ■