

Hi, all,

It's been a couple months since I last wrote to you about the Willow Glen Trestle: time to give an update, and to thank you for your support, and to invite you to a party to help fund the next step.

A week ago Tuesday, the City Council approved the Initial Study and Mitigated Negative Declaration (IS/MND), and staff is now quickly pursuing the necessary permits to demolish the trestle this coming June.

In order to approve this IS/MND, Council first had to officially declare that the trestle was "not historic", since California's environmental law (CEQA) says that the destruction of a historic structure can not simply be "mitigated" by a sign or plaque, but instead requires that the City prepare a more detailed Environmental Impact Report (EIR) that evaluates the alternatives. In declaring it non-historic, the City chose to rely on a 2004 "short-form" historic evaluation of the trestle, and to ignore all the public comments that told how the archives of the Town of Willow Glen, uncovered in 2008, revealed the trestle's rich and fascinating history – a history that would qualify it for listing on the State historic register. (To view the Council discussion, go to http://sanjose.granicus.com/MediaPlayer.php?view_id=51&clip_id=7019 and click on agenda item 4.6: basically, they said "if we say it's historic, it is; if we say it's not, then it's not." The Council then went on to decree that the trestle is not historic, while staff added that "Babe the Muffler Man" on The Alameda probably is historic.)

I started working on the Los Gatos Creek Trail over 30 years ago, and learned about the trestle when we on the County's Los Gatos Creek Streamside Park Committee toured the creek to evaluate potential trail alignments. I have been working with various City Planners for nearly a quarter-century now on the incorporation of the trestle into the trail network. This past decade, friends and I have briefed City, County, Regional, and State officials about the trestle and rail right-of-way, seeking grants so that the City could acquire them for the Three Creeks Trail and its connection to the Los Gatos Creek Trail. All along, the City's plans had been to preserve the trestle and adapt it for trail use. But then this past spring, the City abruptly and unilaterally decided to replace the trestle and to repurpose the trestle restoration grants for demolition instead, and they then used various parliamentary sleights-of-hand to avoid any meaningful public discussion of this decision.

I've enjoyed working with the City on many issues –the Guadalupe River Trail downtown and finding funding for the Three Creeks Trail come to mind – but I have also had to battle the City on occasion in the past, such as in 1990 when we on the Coyote Creek Task Force fought the City's plans to cut down all the trees along the creek to make way for a golf course. However, this time, despite the hundreds of hours we have invested working to save this historic structure for our community, I fear that we will need additional outside support to assure that the City properly complies with the State environmental laws. In addition to saving the trestle, hopefully our efforts can also help preserve other historic structures in San José, and maybe help preservationists all across the state by clarifying aspects of the CEQA law.

Some may claim that our efforts to preserve this historic trestle may jeopardize an important trail connection. But it's >not< an "either/or" choice: we can preserve the history, protect the environment, >and< provide the trail connection: the City's own Engineering Report gives all the details on how this can be done, including fire sprinklers and decades of maintenance, for a total price that's less than the cost of the pre-fabricated replacement bridge. The City may be worried about losing a specific couple-million-dollar grant, but it is better that the money be returned to the tax-payers rather than it be needlessly wasted on demolishing a piece of our history.

I personally have spent half my lifetime working for local trails, historic preservation, and the environment. I know that it can take time and we might not always get everything we'd hoped for, but I also know that it is better to save what we have rather than trying to recall what we had.

Many thanks for all your support! Hopefully one day we'll have a preserved and restored historic trestle to carry bicyclists and joggers along the Los Gatos Creek Trail across a vibrant riparian habitat and over to the heart of Willow Glen!

And: save the date – some friends are throwing a fundraiser dinner on Feb. 22nd to support our efforts to save the trestle: we'll be sending you the details and an invitation soon, and we invite you to pass the invitation along to your friends and colleagues as well!

Thank you,

Larry Ames,
a Friend of the Willow Glen Trestle
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BTW: here's a quick synopsis of the trestle's history:

- The Willow Glen Trestle is not simply some "common design" trestle, but rather is one that was designed and built to the unique conditions of the time and place: the post-World War I shortage of materials, the financial constraints of a business just emerging from bankruptcy, and the need to quickly be able to serve the canneries that were opening in Willow Glen and across San Jose.
- The trestle was built to be strong enough to carry freight, but only if the trains were run "dead slow". This caused traffic congestion, which led to the "grade separation" movement and the eventual incorporation of the Town of Willow Glen.
- The trestle was built by Western Pacific, a rival to the near-monopolistic Southern Pacific Railroad. For decades, the Southern Pacific tracks ran down 4th St., right through the center of San Jose, but when their franchise expired at the turn of the last century the City began pressuring SP to relocate their tracks. The '06 Earthquake and the World War delayed matters for a while, but then the State Railroad Commission recommended that Southern Pacific loop around town by sharing the tracks with the rival Western Pacific.

However, because of the unique design of the Willow Glen trestle, this was not feasible, and so Southern Pacific had to build its own crossing of the Los Gatos Creek – the bridge near San Carlos St. that is still in use today.



the trestle in 1955

- It took some years for Southern Pacific to build their tracks around San Jose, and during all those years, Western Pacific was serving the canneries of the area. It was very profitable for Western Pacific – their “cash cow” – and it enabled Western Pacific to fully emerge from bankruptcy and to expand.
- By the 1930s, Western Pacific had a network of lines going from the Bay Area eastward across the Sierras, providing an alternative to the Southern Pacific monopoly. If the Willow Glen trestle were just a “common trestle”, Western Pacific would not have had the lucrative cannery business pretty much to themselves, Southern Pacific might have gone unchallenged, and the entire Bay Area might have developed entirely differently.