Stop "America's Greenest City" from Paving Wetland

Contributed by Jan Lundberg
14 April 2009

Famous for electing a Green Party majority city council over ten years ago, the northern California town of Arcata has not fulfilled its promise. This is despite pro-peace council resolutions and some ecologically minded policies. Now an entrenched bureaucracy -- catering to economic-growth interests -- wants to build an unneeded road, because frogs can't fight back. However, Culture Change readers can help stop the corrupt insanity.

On Wednesday evening at City Hall the road schemers hope to get approval to spend $2.5 million to extend a road into a wetland, to connect Hwy. 101 with a quiet bedroom community northwest of "downtown" "cArcata." Few people who are aware of it want it.

I'm a former resident of the targeted area, and like many folks I like to hear frogs chirp at night. But they won't be doing so around this mini-boondoggle, if built. Motor-vehicle traffic would increase thanks to the road, upping cArcata's greenhouse emissions.

The few road fighters taking up the defense of the wetland have been hard pressed to gain supporters for their cause, in part because the City has gone around the environmental review process (a Planning Commission function was skipped), and the promotion of two choices for road construction have concealed from the public the obligatory third choice: No Action. Additionally, the notices left at residences in the area may have been largely undelivered to absentee landlords, as the area is heavily student.

You are urged to contact Arcata City Hall right away by phone and email and leave a "No-Action" message for the "Foster Avenue Roadway Extension." Their meeting is Wednesday evening the 15th, but after that your opinion is still timely because of other considerations.

Arcata City Hall

Please telephone the City Manager at 707-822-5953, and email him at citymgr@cityofarcata.org

Email a message to his key staffers:

dclass@cityofarcata.org, osmith@cityofarcata.org, loetker@cityofarcata.org

Council Members

Please telephone them:

Mark Wheetley, Mayor (707) 269-0332

Alex Stillman, Vice Mayor (707) 441-9846

Shane Brinton (707) 522-0387

Susan Ornelas (707) 269-0394

Michael Winkler (707) 522-0463

And email them too; four out five "don't get it":

Mark Wheetley, Mayor mwheetley@cityofarcata.org
Alex Stillman, ViceMayor astillman@cityofarcata.org
Shane Brinton sbrinton@cityofarcata.org
Susan Ornelas sornelas@cityofarcata.org
Michael Winkler mwinkler@cityofarcata.org

Culture Change was told by a reliable roadfighter that Public Works director Doby Class lied when he claimed the road is far away from the creek; not true. Also, his environmental report did not include the seasonal pond near the road, just the Jolly Giant Creek.

The Community Development Director, city staffer for the Planning Commission, was asked him why the Mitigated Negative Declaration (i.e., "no environmental impact") did not go through the Planning Commission. It is standard process for CEQA [Calif. Environmental Quality Act] review. He said that he was a bit surprised that this happened, that he had delegated this process to Doby Class of Public Works and went on to say that he wondered why an EIR [Environmental Impact Report] wasn't done.

Arcata High kids have the creek and wetland right down the hill from the campus -- they are about to be robbed blind and get an "education" on adults' ecological ethics.

The Arcata Fire Dept. just purchased some land on Sunset Ave wanting to build a new fire station. They may be counting on a new road... definitely they have some pull with the council. However, they already have a nice big station in downtown where it needs to be -- even though it sure took them a long time to respond to the Northcoast Environmental center blaze two blocks away, so that it was too late.

Background and bucks

I am intimately familiar with the neighborhood, having lived there for eight years. A road called Sunset, two lanes east to west, starts at the foothills where Humboldt State University has its home. Sunset is never jammed with cars or trucks, but a few dollar-crazed non-environmentalists sense an injustice to polluters on four or more wheels: Sunset kind of goes off into the sunset, turning downhill below my old house to meet another road called Foster. The problem? The connecting roads, Eastern and Western, are not big wide ones, so turns must be done slowly. ("Oh, no!")

So what would be constructed is the Foster Road Extension, to go through a wetland just above a restoration zone called Shay Park, along the lovely, now quiet Jolly Giant Creek. This would satisfy a non-existent need of truckers to go between the larger roads to the east (Hwy 101) and west (Alliance Road). Truckers are generally not trying to go through there, especially with lowered economic activity of late.

But lo and behold, a major subdivision is planned to the west, by Danco construction. Its Creekside development would be getting a "corporate subsidy" from the City. Creedside is an annexation that some citizens are fighting. Regardless the road builders and Danco are locked in the 20th-Century mindset of accommodating endless growth for car-based living. The pro-road builders know better, as the public has made clear its wishes for more green space and fewer cars and trucks.

One road fighter revealed the truth about the road scheme with some history:

The reason the Foster Extension did not go through last time was
plain
and simple. The Janes Creek West Development proposal collapsed
under
massive public protest, and the road just went away after that. Now
the developers and their friends at the City are trying to get the road through somewhat independently,
knowing
it is critical for the Creekside Development approval. They are
playing
it smart.

Part of the trick is to deceive the public:
In the literature from Doby Class to the neighborhood community, it basically said a road was going in; it did not state in words the "no action" alternative... so some of the people on Foster feel hopeless.

I worked with the Public Works director when I served on the Transportation Safety Committee for two years. I was replaced by his assistant supposedly for the sake of gender balance on the committee. But in reality I was targeted by the "Green" council for being too effective: one road was designated car-free, and the town plaza was being studied and prepared to be car free. Incidentally, the Green council accomplished almost nothing, claiming that there weren't enough supporters attending council meetings, so "conservatives" got their way, according to former councilmember Jason Kirkpatrick who was supposedly an anarchist.

The previous Public Works director served our committee ably, but I felt there was something odd about his successor, the present one, Doby Class. He and his Public Works Environmental Planner who replaced me on the old committee, Oona Smith, have treated me strangely over the years, as have many who know my feelings against big roads and car domination.

Such city employees may feel they are paid to "do something" just like other cities do. To leave a mark, build an empire somehow. But, one should stop and think about at least the appearance of corruption -- but hey, "development" and corporate subsidy are the American way. If one is paid by the taxpayers to destroy nature and create more vehicular traffic, does that make it ethical and ecologically sound? A previous council developed a wetland and gave it to a sports gym business, with a massive parking lot.

The overall effect, if one compares an aerial view of Arcata from the 1970s to one taken two or three decades later, is a takeover of grey: concrete and asphalt, with a loss of green. Shay Park's surrounding undeveloped wetland can move into the gray column if this Council does not stop and think about its complicity in bringing about "cArcata."

The Foster Road Extension project is inconsistent with the Arcata General Plan. Here's why: The Transportation Element of the General Plan has a heavy emphasis on alternative transportation. It emphasizes alternative modes of transportation, and sets forth the goal of reducing the percentage of trips that are made by automobile as well as vehicle

miles traveled. These goals are inconsistent with a project that plans for increases in motor-vehicle traffic, whether cars, fire trucks or other trucks. However, the Foster Extension is in the "GP2020" General Plan, so where there's a contradiction, prudence and saving money should win out.

Eloquent letters against road

Dear Mayor, Vice Mayor and City Council Members

My name is Jessie Groeschen. I'm an artist living in Arcata. I moved here from one of the hippest neighborhoods in Seattle, the center of the universe, The Fremont District. It was a place where many artists lived and work, because it was so unique, gentrification developed. I was forced to leave my house and studio I was renting because a 40 unit condominium was to be built there.

I found myself in Arcata, a friend invited me, telling me of the severe New Years Eve windstorm which unfortunately blew over many of the tree in the area...for the last three years, I have been working with those knocked trees, harvesting them and creating art...I serendipitously found myself on Foster Road, a cute little cottage with a garage to keep my wood carving tools in...it's a nice neighborhood. After what happened to me in Seattle, I have foresight it what kind of damage the extension of this road will do.

I live on the corner of Foster and Eastern Ave., the worse corner in the Sunset neighborhood. I experience first hand the road, exhaust and the vehicle noise, especially the loud, speedy trucks. I am thinking for the greater good of our community, I am against the extension of Foster Road. Moving one streets problem to the other doesn't solve anything.

1. The road will have a negative impact on Shay Park, a haven for migrating birds. Also frogs resides here, the Pacific Chorus, possibly the Northern Red Legged, it would affect us humans as well.

2. The road will take away valuable green space and open space. The value of these spaces is it gives us a sense of peace , beauty and serenity. There are not many open spaces left in the city of Arcata, in fact this might be the last. Lets save it, buy it, make a park out of it.

3. Doby Class has claimed that the road is needed to accommodate big trucks, so the shelves of grocery stores are stocked. Really? I've never seen them empty. The future is not to build big roads for big trucks but rather the future is green…less cars.

4. The road will mean more cars. More pollution. The United States represents 4 % of the world's population and we produced 25% of the CO2 . To be viable in the future we need to stay green.

5. The road design is ugly and will degrade Arcata

6. The Road will destroy the look of the historic Sunset community.

7. The Road will make it easier for the expansion of the proposed Danco Project of developing valuable farmland into one of the biggest subdivisions in Humboldt County.
The City of Arcata should look into buying the land where the proposed road is going and make a beautiful green park out of it for the citizens of Arcata. -
Jessie Groeschen, Arcata, CA 95521

Dear City Council Members,

I am a resident on Foster Avenue and music student at Humboldt State. I am opposed to the project to extend Foster Avenue. I grew up in a mid-western town that over the course of my life has turned into one expansive piece of asphalt, shopping centers, and parking lots.

I am writing to you on behalf of the wildlife that uses Shay Park and the area around it. I also write for the neighbors that walk through the park daily, yet do not know about the proposed road project. And I write for the future inhabitants of Arcata, that will most likely be driving less cars and more appreciative of such a potential green space in Arcata.

In the two years that I have lived across from the park I have witnessed a lot of wildlife living in it and using it. I see waterfowl and migrating birds, hawks, songbirds, and hummingbirds. On a map of Arcata, Shay Park is officially listed as a “bird sanctuary”. The Jolly Giant Creek runs through it, and my neighbor, a wildlife biologist, mentioned seeing steelhead in the creek. The proposed road would run alongside the creek for a short way, leading to run-off into the creek.

The same neighbor watched foxes breeding and fox cubs being raised some thirty feet from their backdoor. They actually suggested the idea that Foster Avenue be completely shut off at Alliance Avenue. This neighbor is a renter who is moving soon and does not have time to attend city council meetings. I fear that there are many other voices for preserving this last green space in Arcata, that are not being heard.

Another unheard voice is the future generations of Arcata. One of the world’s top climate change experts was at Humboldt State recently, he said that we cannot continue with “business-as-usual”. He said climate change is not going away. Additionally, the automobile industries are crippled and failing. Oil is a limited and irresponsible resource that will eventually lose its funding. And someday the environmental trade-off will become more known, like in the irreversible damage done to Prince William Sound.

A look at modern cities in Europe shows less cars and smaller cars, with more people cycling, walking, and taking public transportation. In cities like Denmark, Amsterdam, and Berlin, one sees men in business suits and women in high-heeled shoes, riding bicycles. It appears to me that our city planners are out of touch with a realistic future and the desires of many Arcatan residents: that more people will be using alternative modes of transportation in the future.

Many people walk through Shay Park and along the railroad tracks on a daily basis. This is what I clearly observe, living across from the park. There is a path that goes up the hill into the middle of town, traversing the railroad track path. Students and families can be seen making use of these paths from dawn to dusk. I would like to propose that people need nature, too. That a respite from the busy roads is good for the mind and body. A fifty-foot wide road is NOT the same thing as a walk through nature. Also there are two sports fields near the skate park that would end up with this large road directly above them. There is a buffer of greenery between the road and sports fields now. The aesthetics of the sports fields and the air they would be breathing should also be considered. The best possible vision for the open land this proposed road would be built on, would be to extend Shay Park and let the existing habitat heal into a haven of nature, for people, birds, and amphibians to enjoy.

In my front yard I see tree frogs all during the rainy season. My neighbor saw a salamander in her front yard. The amphibians are thriving in Shay Park and the wetland/field area next to it. At night in the winter the tree frogs are so loud, there must be thousands of them. It seems that the proposed road would impact them the most. People can go elsewhere for nature. The birds would, too. But the frogs can’t leave. They would hop into the road and die. Also the

vibrations from such a large road would be very disturbing to such tiny critters. All of the marshy areas around Shay Park have tadpoles in them. It has not been determined that there are any of the endangered Northern Red-Legged frogs. This may be an issue: as to whether a sufficient impact report on this rare species of frog has been assessed. It is unfortunate that the other rare amphibian species are not given equal consideration. The abundant presence of these other amphibian species should not be discounted.

Furthermore, the expense of this road seems disproportionate to the actual need. The market is closed and there are only two gas stations on Alliance that may need “18-wheelers”, as the proposed road allows for. The land the road would go through is marshy and has springs in it. From my experience of living in the country, this means potholes will constantly be dropping out of the road. This will only require further expenses for repairs. And the proposed route that goes along the railroad tracks involves an elaborate method of raising and propping the road up, which is surely expensive.

Where is this funding supposed to come from? If California is suffering a budget crisis and cannot pay its schools and teachers, yet we can afford to build futile roads, then where are our priorities?

To reiterate the reasons I oppose this proposed road project:

1. I think the land would be better suited as a park for people, and habitat for existing amphibians and birds.

2. I do not see a fifty-foot wide road through this area to be in alignment with a realistic view of the future.

3.I see the proposed road project as an unsuitable expense and too grand of a plan.

Sincerely,

Sally Kiefer

Sally's statement, said a witness, "fell on deaf ears... the city council did not go for the passion, the points, or the simple plain reasoning."

Councilmember Susan Ornelas, big on small organic farming, told a disappointed road fighter that "Thirty years ago, I thought that oil would run out but it hasn't...its still here, and I have to make a decision for today."

Councilmember Michael Winkler, a good energy analyst who helped steer the local university away from fuel cell car fantasies, and who funded the local Kinkos to use only 100% post-consumer-waste paper, is also using fuzzy thinking: in a letter to a road fighter, he said he usually bikes and buses but "the main mode of transportation is the car. I recognize that reality and accommodate it." - shocking, Michael.

He was contacted early Wednesday regarding the odd environmental-regulations procedure that greased the wheels for possibly approving the Foster extension: Lisa Brown, proprietor of Solutions, the eco-retailer, said

I am both disappointed in the council's decision on the MND [mitidaged negative environmental declaration], and am questioning the process that was followed.

I have carefully reviewed the LUC and the Muni code with respect to MND review authority. When I asked Larry why the MND did not go through the Planning Commission for the Foster Extension, Larry said that he deferred the project to Doby, who made the decision to go straight to the Council with the MND. While Larry has the authority to designate Doby as the Environmental Coordinator for the project, Doby does not have the authority to change the course of environmental review procedures since these processes are codified.

In our LUC, under Environmental Review, the review authority is described as just that, the "review authority". In order to find clarification on who the review authority is, you need to go to the muni code...

My E-comment sent prior to the prior council meeting:

Road construction & road widenings create more traffic as government agencies know: "Traffic generation."

As for access, it's now fine for ecologically appropriate walking and bicycling. For animals' needs, they demand less, not more pavement, and far fewer killer vehicles.
The new universal economic conditions around the corner, post-petrocollapse and Depression, mean the old paradigm of growth (e.g., more roads & vehicles as well population) is a poor investment for cArcata.

Earth First! -JL

Greetings Shane and Susan,

Let's save some nature, eh friends?

Aside from climate extinction, we still have that ol' war for oil crankin' for our crankcases.

I sent my comments to NCJournal too.

Thanks,

Jan

I commented online on Wednesday April 15 (must be before 8 AM West Coast time), at Agenda; scroll down to VIII OLD BUSINESS, B:

"On ecological grounds Foster Extension proposal lacks sense. Just because it was specified in the general plan doesn't mean it should be pursued. I lived right nearby for 8 years. The alleged traffic justification doesn't hold up.

Knowing this scheme's promotion and the Danco factor, something doesn't smell good. And I'm familiar with Lisa Brown's questions for Michael Winkler.

If you vote for this road you might not live down the disgrace. CultureChange.org has alerted the world to this story."

Arcata's Councilmembers would do well to read "Earth Jurisprudence: Legal Rights for Gaia" by Susan Meeker-Lowry, on Culture Change culturechange.org.

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Photos by Jessie Groeschen

This report is Culture Change Letter #249