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FACT SHEET

THE HISTORIC ARROYO SECO PARKWAY

A Beautiful Parkway, the First Freeway in the Urban Western United States, and a National Scenic Byway

The beautiful and historic Arroyo Seco Parkway, also known as the Pasadena Freeway (State Route 110), marked an important transitional moment in the history of American freeway engineering and transportation. It has the distinction of being the first freeway -- a grade-separated, limited-access, high-speed divided road -- in the urban western United States. Termed an “engineering marvel,” it was the initial stretch of road for what would become the world-renowned Los Angeles metropolitan area freeway system.

Dedicated on December 30, 1940, and built in major three stages, the 8.2-mile Parkway was conceived in the parkway tradition with gentle curves and lush landscaping – envisioned both as a scenic pleasure road and a vital traffic artery linking the growing cities of Pasadena and Los Angeles. Incorporating modern elements that would lay the groundwork for the California freeway system, the Parkway became a prototype for urban freeways throughout the United States and the rest of the world – paving the way for more than 4,000 miles of California freeways that have come after it.

The Pasadena Freeway (SR-110) Arroyo Seco Parkway is a six-lane highway, with three lanes in each north/south in each direction. The highway provides essential access points to historical monuments, such as the Lummis House, the Southwest Museum and scenic easements and park/habitat linkages.

In the late 1990’s, documentation of the Parkway was needed to determine its original features and develop ways to re-create its historical appearance. Caltrans invited the Historic American Engineering Record (HAER) to document the Parkway as part of its long-range program that records historically-significant engineering, industrial and maritime sites in the United States for the Library of Congress. The program was administered by the Historic American Buildings Survey/Historic American Engineering Record (HABS/HAER) Division of the National Park Service, United States Department of the Interior. Findings were presented on August 12, 1999 at the California State Office Building in Downtown Los Angeles. Shortly thereafter the American Society of Civil Engineers (ASCE) designated the Parkway a National Historic Civil Engineering Landmark.

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A Landscape Framework Plan for the Arroyo Seco Parkway Corridor, prepared in 2000 by a team of Cal Poly Pomona landscape architecture graduate students under the direction of the Caltrans Environmental Planning Division, recommended inter-modal linkages providing usage and ease of transfer between auto, bus, light-rail, bicycle, trolley and trail users. Also recommended were landscape improvements, development of parks and park connections, scenic bikeways, preservation of scenic views and easements and ideas for making the roadway and those areas adjacent to the roadway, more park-like -- including a contiguous biking/hiking link from the Pasadena area to Downtown Los Angeles. These recommendations will be used as a basis for future federal funding applications.

In 1991, the federal government's Inter-modal Surface Transportation Efficiency Act created a new Scenic Byways Program -- a Federal effort to promote scenic roads in America. A nationally-designated scenic byway helps to provide economic development through tourism, as the road is promoted by the federal government.

For a road to qualify as a Scenic Byway, it must fulfill certain criteria -- the road must have scenic, natural, historical, cultural, recreational or archaeological significance. The Arroyo Seco Parkway, significant in most categories, was found to be an eligible road for application to the federal Scenic Byways Program.

In 1992, Senator Richard Polanco (then Assemblyman), wanted to improve the appearance and enhance the safety of the Parkway in and near Los Angeles. Widening was not possible because there was no available right of way. Subsequently, Assembly Bill (AB27) designated the highway as a California Historic Parkway, a new category of road within the Scenic Highway system. This stimulated efforts to pursue preservation and rehabilitation of the historic roadway and the adjacent communities.

A task force was then formed involving Caltrans, the owner and operator of the California Highway system, and other local agencies and citizens groups, to find ways to make improvements, enhance safety and provide new signage befitting its new status, as a first step. A Transportation Enhancement Activities (TEA) grant was subsequently received to install new signage on the Parkway.

On June 13, 2002, U. S. Transportation Secretary, Norman Y. Mineta, officially announced that the historic Arroyo Seco Parkway had been officially given a "National Scenic Byway" designation -- the first in Los Angeles County or in any metropolitan/urban area in California. The Arroyo Seco Parkway is the fourth federal scenic byway designation in the state, the others being Pacific Coast Highway (Route 1) through Big Sur in Monterey County; Route 190 in Death Valley National Park; and Tioga Road/Big Oak Flat Road in Yosemite National Park.

The Scenic Byways designation makes federal funding available for improvements along the Parkway corridor, such as increasing multi-modal transportation choices, thereby reducing demand on the Parkway and stimulating a much needed economic investment in a historically and aesthetically-significant area.

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The ArroyoFest in June 2003, closed the Parkway for a few hours and during this time, more than 3,000 bike riders and thousands of walkers participated in various activities. The ArroyoFest was a celebration of the history and diverse cultural resources, as well as a celebration of efforts by many agencies and community groups to work together in preserving the Arroyo's natural, historic and cultural resources.

An improvement project to upgrade the median and side barriers on the Pasadena Freeway (SR-110) /Arroyo Seco Parkway from the Golden State Freeway (I-5) to Glenarm Street – and from the Avenue 26 overcrossing and York Boulevard/Pasadena Road overcrossing -- is expected to begin in the winter of 2008/2009 and complete in the winter of 2010/2011. In addition, historic lighting will be built into the concrete barrier. This project will reduce maintenance costs, reduce exposure of Caltrans highway workers to traffic -- and enhance the safety of the traveling public.

A Corridor Management Plan (CMP) will help to define the future of the Parkway. The CMP is community-based and a flexible "living document" that specifies actions, procedures, controls, operational practices, and strategies to preserve, restore, and maintain the scenic, historic, recreational, archeological, and natural qualities within the viewshed of a Scenic Byway, as well as continue to address key issues, such as roadway safety, mobility, tourism development and economic development – and demonstrates a commitment to preserving and enhancing the Parkway. The CMP will also identify a wide range of projects/activities to increase efficiency and throughput – and also to maximize use of alternative modes available in the corridor.

What has been considered a California treasure due to the Parkways' distinctive history, scenic beauty and cultural significance, is now also a national treasure -- and the National Scenic Byways Program will help to preserve the resources that exist there for generations to come.