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Hollywood plots freeway coverup

Leaders push a plan to enclose half a mile of the roadway in a tunnel and place a greenbelt on top.

By Bob Pool

Times Staff Writer

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In a town built on make-believe, Hollywood leaders are hoping to pull off the greatest feat yet: creating a public park out of thin air.

Civic and business organizers want to turn a half-mile portion of the Hollywood Freeway into a tunnel and construct a 24-acre greenbelt swath from Bronson Avenue to Wilton Place on top.

Those proposing what they call Hollywood Central Park will reveal preliminary details tonight when leaders of the Hollywood Chamber of Commerce and the Los Angeles Community Redevelopment Agency meet with local business executives in an effort to raise \$120,000 for a project feasibility study.

When the study is completed, local leaders say, they will be able to seek federal funding for the estimated \$209 million that the freeway retrofit and park construction could cost.

Backers say other densely populated U.S. cities have undertaken similar projects to carve out hard-to-find recreation space.

They say the portion of the freeway that passes beneath Sunset and Hollywood boulevards near the heart of Hollywood is perfect for what is known as a "freeway cap." Traffic lanes there are below the level of neighborhoods on both sides.

Although urban planners in the past informally discussed a Hollywood tunnel, the current proposal got its start by accident at last year's Hollywood Christmas Parade when a Hollywood Chamber of Commerce director drove over the freeway on his way home.

"I was bemoaning the fact that the freeway cut a giant scar through Hollywood as I crossed over it on Hollywood Boulevard," board member Don Scott recalled Tuesday. "Over Christmas I did some research on the Internet and came up with a proposal."

Scott, an investment banker who lives in Pacific Palisades, discovered that similar freeway-spanning parks have been built in Seattle; Cincinnati; Washington, D.C.; Boston; Phoenix; and Hartford, Conn. Charlotte, N.C., is designing one. Locally, a small park extends over the 210 Freeway in La Cañada-Flintridge.

Other chamber leaders were quick to embrace Scott's idea.

"We have a 150-acre park deficit in Hollywood," said architect Ed Hunt, a parks supporter who for years has advocated using freeway airspace. "Taxpayers own it. Caltrans is the custodian," Hunt said.

In recent weeks the chamber proposal has won support from the Southern California Assn. of Governments (which is considering it as a possible demonstration project), four Hollywood-area neighborhood councils, the redevelopment agency and Los Angeles City Councilmen Tom LaBonge and Eric Garcetti, who represent Hollywood.

"Hollywood had a Brown Derby. Now it can have a real lid on the Hollywood Freeway," said LaBonge. "The city grew so fast that they didn't originally put enough parks in. The neighborhood parks we have there now are postage-stamp size."

Hollywood chamber President Leron Gubler said preliminary estimates suggest that the 24-acre freeway-top greenbelt could be built for about \$200 a square foot. "That would be cheaper than buying land, and there would be no eminent domain proceedings involved," Gubler said.

State highway officials who operate the Hollywood Freeway say they have taken note of the community support for the park.

But "this is very early in the process. A feasibility study will determine if it's viable," Caltrans spokeswoman Jeanne Bonfilio said Tuesday.

Study costs will total about \$250,000, said Kim Sudhalter, a spokeswoman for the city redevelopment agency. That agency's board is considering contributing \$100,000 toward the study; the Chamber of Commerce has obtained commitments for about \$30,000 and tonight will ask the business community to help finance the rest, she said.

The study would examine uses for the proposed swath of parkland as well as design requirements. Hollywood and Sunset boulevards would extend through the open space, which would link the eastern and western sides of Hollywood and serve as a scenic frontyard for a new public high school being built next to the freeway on Sunset Boulevard.

Those who live and work near the proposed park say recreational space is greatly needed for children and families living in crowded neighborhoods on both sides of the freeway. Thousands of dwelling units are under construction nearby as a redevelopment boom continues in the historic Hollywood district.

"They don't just need open space here; they need places for organized sports," said Tasha Busch, a counselor at Grant Elementary School — which has been on Wilton Place for 103 years. "But it would have to be supervised; a park can have a lot of bad along with the good."

Resident Juan Ramos said he would welcome the freeway conversion. "It would be very good. Kids need a place around here to play," he said, pointing to his 3-year-old daughter, Daniella.

Freeway users were a bit more cautious about the park plan, however.

Motorist Sona Basmadjian wondered about the claustrophobic feel the half-mile tunnel might have for commuters inching through the area during morning and evening rush hours.

If it wasn't properly maintained and well-lighted, "it could be creepy," said the TV history curator, who lives in Glendale. "And I wouldn't want to be in there in an earthquake."

Michael Ben-Levi, a psychologist who lives in the Fairfax district and was shopping Tuesday at a Home Depot next to the proposed park site, said creative design could help remedy the tunnel feeling.

"It's a good idea. But they should construct it with sufficient openings so daylight and air can get in and you wouldn't feel so enclosed," he said. "The openings could be landscaped and properly fenced. It wouldn't take that much away from the park."

The Hollywood reaction is more positive than that of downtown Los Angeles, which 17 years ago gave a lukewarm reception to a plan to build a \$33-million monument sculpture over the Hollywood Freeway between Olvera Street and the Civic Center. The "Steel Cloud" was supposed to become the West Coast's answer to the Statue of Liberty. But it never got off the ground — or over the freeway.

"Maybe with a new lid on Hollywood they can finally put a hat on the downtown slot too," Councilman LaBonge said.

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