

PLAZA DE PANAMA PROJECT

MYTH VS. FACT



A great deal of misinformation has been circulated about the Plaza de Panama project, which will remove traffic from the historic heart of Balboa Park, create 6.3 acres of parkland, gardens and pedestrian-friendly plazas, and provide a free tram system and an underground parking garage in the core of the park.

Below are 10 of the most common “myths” about the project, along with the correct factual information.

For more information, including project history, designs, videos, and documents, please visit www.plazadepanama.org.

MYTH: The Plaza de Panama project will harm the Cabrillo Bridge, destroy an iconic view of a historic building, and put Balboa Park at risk of losing its National Register designation.

FACT: The project will not harm the Cabrillo Bridge. Its sole impact would occur on the bridge’s eastern abutment, far from its span across the Cabrillo Canyon, and would consist solely of removing fewer than 70 feet of concrete road railing. This will allow eastbound traffic, once it has crossed the Cabrillo Bridge, to turn from the roadway onto a bypass bridge, thereby protecting the park’s central plazas and preserve them for pedestrians. This railing is so far to the east of the true bridge that there is an existing building across the street. This [diagram](#) shows the relationship between the existing Administration Building and the proposed bypass, the Centennial Bridge.

The “iconic view” that project opponents claim would be violated -- the view of a corner of the Museum of Man -- has been blocked by trees for more than 75 years. These trees were planted by the same architect who designed the building, Bertram Goodhue, and he certainly knew they would grow to their current heights. The trees have obstructed the view, without controversy, since at least [1935](#). Project opponents have argued that the trees should be removed, and also claimed that the city intends to remove them -- a claim that is [false](#). The Centennial Bridge will not affect the views of the Cabrillo Bridge to travelers on Highway 163, nor will it be visible to cars or pedestrians traveling east on the Cabrillo Bridge until they are close to the Museum of Man.

With respect to the claim concerning the National Register designation, City Historical Resources staff issued a [memo](#) stating that there is no substance or precedent indicating that

the project will cause Balboa Park to lose its historic designation. This designation is based on the composition of multiple buildings and landscapes, and a limited impact on one element -- particularly in light of the project's significant restoration of the historic core of the park -- in no way threatens the historic designation.

MYTH: Closing the Cabrillo Bridge to vehicles is a low-cost way to remove traffic from the Plaza de Panama without construction of a bypass bridge.

FACT: Closing the Cabrillo Bridge sounds simple, but it would create significant problems and significant costs for the city. Four impacts are identified below.

Impact on neighboring communities. The loss of all private-vehicle access to Balboa Park from the west would result in increased parking issues in the Park West and Banker's Hill communities. And because Park Boulevard would become the sole access route for vehicles entering Balboa Park, there would be increased traffic in the neighborhoods of Uptown, Hillcrest, North Park, Burlingame and Golden Hill. The traffic improvements necessary to mitigate these impacts have no identified funding source.

Impact on Balboa Park institutions. Bridge closure will create access issues for visitors to a number of institutions that will no longer have nearby drop-off areas, especially the Museum of Man, the Old Globe Theater, the Museum of Art, the Mingei Museum and the Timken Museum. Many Balboa Park institutions anticipate that it would harm attendance and create a severe financial hardship for them.

Impact on the Alcazar parking lot and ADA access. Closure of the Plaza de Panama to vehicles (the goal of closing the Cabrillo Bridge) would cut off the only access route into the [Alcazar parking lot](#). The parking lot could not be reopened until a new road is designed, approved and built. In addition, the Alcazar lot itself would need to be redesigned and rebuilt to accommodate the 21 disabled-accessible parking spaces now located in the Plaza de Panama. This could not be accomplished through restriping, as the slope of the Alcazar lot is not compliant with ADA laws, and requires leveling. Both projects are costly and time-consuming, and neither has a funding source. Even when these projects are complete, the Alcazar lot would continue to be a congested cul-de-sac, though now accommodating increased traffic from additional drop-offs and, presumably, valet service.

Impact on park aesthetics. The purpose of closing the bridge is to reclaim the areas beyond it. Yet bridge-closure advocates have no plan to restore the Plaza de Panama, West El Prado and Plaza de California once the roads and parking stalls are open to pedestrians. Merely removing cars from them does not make them aesthetically pleasing places that are worthy of Balboa Park. The cost of properly designing and then transforming these areas from vehicular areas into people-friendly spaces has no identified funding source.

Bridge closure is one of the project alternatives to be studied in the environmental impact report (EIR) being prepared as part of the formal review and approval process. But even without that analysis, it is clear that these impacts will occur and that solutions will run into the millions of dollars. The Plaza de Panama Committee carefully studied its options before proposing a project that is fully funded and meets the high standards of Balboa Park and its users.

MYTH: The bypass road will destroy the peaceful atmosphere in Alcazar Gardens.

FACT: It is anticipated that the project will have no adverse impact on the Gardens, and could make them more tranquil. Today, as many as 7,000 cars a day pass the north side of Alcazar Gardens along El Prado. With the implementation of the Plaza de Panama project, this same number of cars will pass Alcazar Gardens on the south side, but the traffic will be farther from

the Gardens than the current distance of cars travelling on El Prado. In addition, the traffic will be at a lower grade than it is along El Prado and there is additional landscape space and a low wall to buffer sound.

Put another way: today Alcazar Gardens gets vehicular noise from both the north and south. With this project there will be no vehicular noise from the north, and noise from the south will be mitigated.

MYTH: Cars will have to make a dangerous turn to access the bypass, and it will create a dangerous situation for pedestrians.

FACT: The turn onto the bypass is a simple right turn, controlled by a stop sign and with no cross traffic from vehicles. Pedestrians on the north side of Cabrillo Bridge will not cross traffic. Pedestrians on the south side will cross a marked crosswalk at a two-way stop.

If you want to see a [complicated and hazardous intersection](#), however, look at how vehicles currently make a 90-degree turn in the Plaza de Panama. They encounter high numbers of pedestrians and a steady stream of vehicles circling the central fountain in search of parking spaces and exit routes. Recent traffic analysis shows that at peak times (2 to 3 p.m. on weekends) there are 600 cars per hour turning right from West El Prado into the Plaza de Panama, and there are 700 pedestrians crossing traffic at this intersection during this same hour. At the proposed bypass intersection, 600 cars per hour will turn right, but with only 200 pedestrians crossing traffic, a 71% decrease in pedestrian/auto conflicts. The Plaza de Panama project reduces pedestrian and vehicle conflicts, resulting in significantly safer conditions for pedestrians than the current traffic conditions in the park.

Other pedestrian hazards occur in the [Plaza de California](#), the courtyard within the Museum of Man, where the project would also remove vehicular traffic.

MYTH: The project severely limits pedestrian access between the Plaza de Panama and the Pan American Plaza.

FACT: The Plaza de Panama project will enhance the pedestrian access between the Plaza de Panama and the Pan American Plaza. Current pedestrian access between these two spaces is limited to 8-foot-wide sidewalks on either side of the two-lane Pan American Road (and only one sidewalk in some areas). Pan American Road will become a [pedestrian promenade](#) with the implementation of the project. At its narrowest point, the promenade would be 48 feet wide – the same width as the current roadway and sidewalks. The Plaza de Panama project provides a more generous pedestrian walkway than the approved Central Mesa Precise Plan.

MYTH: Paid parking will not work with free parking nearby. It will require that paid parking be charged elsewhere in Balboa Park in order for people to be willing to pay for parking at this location.

FACT: The parking revenue projections used by the Plaza de Panama Committee are based on a study that assumed free parking would be available in nearby surface lots. The study was conducted by a reputable parking consultant and validated through an independent peer review. Then it was reviewed by the City of San Diego Debt Management Department, which also accepted its revenue projections.

It is not unusual for paid parking to exist in close proximity with free parking; it works just fine in other areas of San Diego. Some park visitors will be happy to pay a small charge to park in a shaded structure that is serviced by a tram and close to the park amenities they want to visit. Others will walk a little farther to avoid paying for parking. The choice is left to the individual. Even when considering that free parking would be as close as the Pan America Plaza, the study

found that the parking structure would generate enough revenue to support a construction bond, operations and maintenance of the structure, and the operation of the free tram. There is a serious shortage of parking in Balboa Park – especially conveniently located parking – and the Plaza de Panama project addresses this demand while reducing circulation in the park caused by cars searching for an available spot. Overall, the project adds 267 parking spots in the heart of the park.

MYTH: The Plaza de Panama Committee is not interested in public feedback and refuses to consider alternatives to the project.

FACT: The Committee has participated in roughly 90 meetings with citizen groups, Balboa Park organizations and other stakeholders, most of them at its own instigation. The project is exceeding the stringent public process requirements called for by city and state law.

Public feedback has resulted in positive changes to the project from the first meeting, held more than a year ago, at which leaders of the disabled community provided input on how the park core could be friendlier for people with physical challenges. Since then, there have been countless improvements made to the project based on public feedback, and there continue to be. Prominent examples include: keeping two-way traffic on Cabrillo Bridge; [pedestrian improvements](#) along the rim of Palm Canyon; retention of the [fountain](#) in the Plaza de Panama; preliminary [design of the rooftop park](#) on the parking structure; working with the retired park horticulturalist to address concerns about specific trees and landscape features; landscape and hardscape issues; the minimization of retaining walls; the addition of sound-buffering walls to the Alcazar Gardens lot; and the ongoing efforts to reduce visual impact of the Centennial Bridge.

In addition, the Committee has analyzed every serious alternative presented to it. For example, at one meeting, the leader of the Save Our Heritage Organisation (SOHO) endorsed having cars enter the park [across the Quince Street bridge](#) over Highway 163, from which they would follow a two-lane road under the Cabrillo Bridge and then climb the canyon slope. The Plaza de Panama Committee team undertook a technical analysis of this proposal, and determined that it would require [40-foot-high retaining walls](#) in Cabrillo Canyon and other environmental degradations, which the Committee could not support. As a result of this analysis, the plan lost its support.

As part of the CEQA review process, the EIR will include a review of a number of alternatives that were identified in testimony at public meetings, or submitted to the City's Development Services Department. City staff will review alternatives and place them into one of two categories: 1) Alternatives for full CEQA analysis, and 2) Alternatives considered but rejected. An alternative would be rejected if it is deemed infeasible, meets none of the project objectives, or fails to eliminate a significant impact. The reason for its rejection will be discussed in the EIR. Alternatives that move forward for full CEQA analysis will meet at least some objectives of the project, will be analyzed for each topic in the EIR and will be compared to the proposed project.

MYTH: The Plaza de Panama [Memorandum of Understanding](#) (MOU) is illegal because it commits the City Council to a project before the environmental analysis is complete.

FACT: The San Diego City Attorney analyzed this claim by SOHO and found it had no merit. A [Memorandum of Law](#) on this topic was released on July 5, 2011. In it, the City Attorney wrote that the Memorandum of Understanding is "a preliminary non-binding agreement" that expresses the City's commitment to moving the project through the preliminary stages, including environmental review, necessary to bring it to the City Council for a later decision. It does not pre-empt environmental review or the public process; it requires them. And as the MOU makes clear, the City Council fully retains the right to reject the proposed project, and to adopt an alternative project, or no project at all.

MYTH: The plan has no funding.

FACT: A commitment was made by Dr. Irwin Jacobs and the Plaza de Panama Committee to raise \$25 million in private funding to help pay for the project. The remaining funding – approximately \$15 million - would come from a revenue bond to pay for the parking structure, repaid by revenue generated from parking fees. The Memorandum of Understanding states explicitly that the Plaza de Panama Committee is responsible for any cost overruns, ensuring that taxpayer funds would not be at risk.

MYTH: The project can never get built by 2015.

FACT: A well thought-out schedule was prepared by construction management professionals to guide the project through the necessary approvals and completion of construction in advance of December 31, 2014, allowing the newly restored Plaza de Panama to be a centerpiece for the [2015 Centennial Celebration of the 1915 Panama-California Exhibition](#). So far, the project has met all milestones in the schedule.