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ON THE WATER | SPOTLIGHT ON SURFING

# Big wave of unity stopped toll road in its tracks

By Brad Melekian

Among the towers of withering support provided by advocates for the 241 Foothill South Toll Road at last week's California Coastal Commission hearing was the charge that surfers, as hard-core locals, were opposed to the measure because they didn't want inlanders coming to the beach.

To support this position, one transportation official, speaking in his allotted two minutes during the public comment portion of the hearing, played a regrettable tape of a Trestles surfer speaking to National Public Radio's Robert Siegel, explaining to Siegel that the reason surfers were opposed to the toll road was because they didn't want "909ers" at their beach.

For some, this may be true, but for the thousands of surfers who gathered at Wyland Hall at the Del Mar Fairgrounds last Wednesday, the day marked a proud moment in surfing history, as surfers proved themselves to be a compassionate, conscientious subset of the population capable of rallying together in an uncanny manner when galvanized by a cause.

No doubt that surfing, at times, is an intensely divided sport, and that it exists with its fair share of contentiousness.

Lineups are affected, and surfers who have known one way of enjoying the lifestyle for decades are having to adapt to an ever-expanding surf population, a newfound commercialism and more.

But for one very long day last Wednesday, Southern California surfers put on display an undying unity.

Arriving well before 9 a.m., surfers piled into the Del Mar Fairgrounds, thousands of them carrying signs and peaceably making their voices heard.

As speaker after speaker — public officials and private citizens — spoke out for two minutes at a time, surfers carried signs and silently voiced their support via thumbs up or thumbs down, aware that too much rowdiness could impede the hearings.

While it was to be expected that surfers would be out in force to defend the threat to the San Onofre State Park and the world-class waves at Lower Trestles, their endurance was impressive.

As day bled into afternoon and evening and night and late night, the crowd may have thinned, but hundreds upon hundreds of surfers stayed on, a testament to their passion.

One speaker, a public official from an inland Orange County city, made the comment that she was at the hearing to represent her constituents who, unlike the surfers, couldn't be at the hearing because they "actually go to work." Of course this portrait of surfer-as-unemployed-beach-bum is antiquated and ignorant, and fell flat in a room where surfers proved that they were not afraid to work hard for a cause in which they believed.

When the commission members broke for dinner at around 6:30, stating that they'd come back for the public comment portion, the surfing opposition, led by the Surfrider Foundation, gathered its supporters and made the confident — and powerful — decision to cede their time back to the commission.

A speaker got up and told the commission that out of respect for the panel, rather than speaker after speaker droning on about why it's absurd to build a toll road through a

state park, the surfers would simply entrust the Coastal Commission to make the right decision. Each of these surfers, the speaker said, opposes the toll road. Then, for the next five minutes, surfer after surfer — hundreds of them — walked in an organized, orderly and calm single-file row as the crowd roared.

When role was called at nearly 11:30, and the commission voted 8-2 against the toll road, a roar went up from the crowd of surfers, while a tiny pocket of toll road proponents in suits with parted hair looked on disapprovingly.

The roar went on for minutes, sending chills down a surfer's spine.

Surfrider Foundation Assistant Environmental Director Mark Rauscher called the decision the biggest victory in the history of the foundation.

Meanwhile, I sat next to Rusty Long, professional surfer from San Clemente and the son of a state parks lifeguard who actually lives within the state park.

He summed it up more simply. "Brilliant," he said.

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