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Questions about drain plan

Colorado Lagoon: The right course is more study.

A Superior Court judge's decision last week to delay the proposed storm drain project at Colorado Lagoon was the right one.

Not because the project is necessarily bad, but because there are still questions about its environmental impacts that could be explored in more depth.

Plus, there's no rush. The primary reason for the project is to alleviate massive flooding, and Long Beach hasn't had rains of that magnitude since 1995. The city has survived without the drain so far, and a season's wait shouldn't be too risky.

Los Angeles County engineers proposed the \$14-million system after 1995's severe flooding, which caused waist-high waters in some parts of the city. During such massive floods, the proposed drain would channel water from an area near Redondo Avenue and Anaheim Street directly to the lagoon.

County engineers say the lagoon is equipped to handle the extra water. But a local group called Friends of the Colorado Lagoon disagrees. The group filed a lawsuit against the project, claiming it would dangerously alter salt levels at the lagoon, endanger fish and plants, cause erosion and worsen flooding in the lagoon area, among other problems.

The group's position was boosted recently by the California Department of Fish and Game and the National Marine Fisheries Service, which warned the county that the lagoon's marine life could be harmed by the project.

On Friday a judge put a stop to the drainage project, saying that the county's initial study was inadequate, and the environmental impacts should be further studied.

The ruling will allow both sides to negotiate an agreement on how the county will reexamine its findings. If such an agreement can't be reached by the end of July, the judge will decide how the project should proceed.

As we've said before, the storm drain project isn't necessarily a bad thing. There would be several benefits and improvements that neither side disputes.

Dry-weather urban runoff (a foul mix of dirty water, oil, fertilizers and other pollutants) would be diverted to the sewer system for processing at sanitation plants, rather than empty directly into the lagoon as it does now. Storm drains would be outfitted with catch basins to collect trash. Normal rain runoff would be diverted at the rate of 20,000 gallons a minute into a system that would remove trash, oil and pollutants.

But questions still linger about the impact of a rare, severe flood, a so-called 50-year storm, would have on the lagoon.

If the new study supports Friends of the Colorado Lagoon's claims, then the county will have to find another way to control flooding. If, on the other hand, the new study supports the county's original findings, then the project should be allowed to proceed.

At this stage of the proposal, there is little harm in ensuring all the facts are in.