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Drain filing pulled back

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LONG BEACH - The County of Los Angeles has withdrawn its application to the California Coastal Commission to build a \$14 million storm drain project in the Colorado Lagoon, officials said Tuesday.

The Termino Avenue Drain Project, which was designed to alleviate flooding in a 596-acre watershed, was scheduled to be reviewed by the commission in August. But a court order requiring the county to take another look at its initial environmental impact study prompted officials to withdraw the application in a letter received by the commission on Tuesday.

"The reason we withdrew is because we want to see what is in the final language of the court order before we proceed," said project manager James Yang. "Since our document was remanded back to us and since what we need to do is unclear, we don't think it would be appropriate to present (the original application) to the Coastal Commission for approval."

The county plans to reapply for its coastal permits once the court decides how the county should research potential problems with its design and its drain's environmental impact, Yang said.

While the county downplayed its move - saying it will eventually continue with the project - a group protesting the drain system said the decision was a major step in its months-long fight for an improved design.

"It is our belief that the county now recognizes that they underestimated the impacts the Termino Avenue Drain Project would have on the lagoon," said Michael Pauls, president of Friends of the Colorado Lagoon. "The withdrawal of this application validates our position."

His group, which filed a lawsuit that prompted the court's decision July 3, worries that the drain system anchored at Redondo Avenue and Pacific Coast Highway will cause an influx of fresh water that will dramatically change salt levels in the lagoon. Friends of the Colorado Lagoon is also concerned that it would erode the lagoon floor and flood the surrounding area.

County officials, meanwhile, dispute these claims, saying their latest studies indicate the system would alleviate flooding.

Both sides are in the midst of determining exactly how the county will re-examine the project's potential effects. If no agreement is reached, the courts will step in on July 24.