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It's baaaack! A proposed aerial tram to the Hollywood Sign

R. Daniel Foster · Wednesday, October 7th, 2020

“How do I get to the Hollywood sign?”

That's the question I'm invariably asked when hiking in Griffith Park, the largest urban wilderness park in the United States. Los Angeles has long been vexed about how to best direct visitors to the landmark without [clogging residential neighborhoods](#). So it's not surprising that aerial tram proposals, replete with a sign-adjacent viewing platform, keep cropping up – like a bad rash.

Four possible tram routes are outlined in the newest proposal, the [Griffith Park Aerial Transit Study](#) initiated by the Department of Recreation and Parks.

The tram was proposed in 2018, although billionaire power couple Barry Diller and Diane von Furstenberg [offered to throw some cash](#) (up to \$30 million) at the idea the previous year.



A rendering of one of four proposed routes for an aerial tram / Photo courtesy Friends of Griffith Park

A duplicate Hollywood sign?

In 2018, the Los Angeles City Council, spearheaded by Councilmember David Ryu, produced [the Dixon Report](#). It was packed with ways to improve access, safety and mobility around Griffith Park and the [Hollywood sign](#). The report's solutions included ridesharing zones, extending shuttle routes—and even replicating the Hollywood sign on the other side of the mountain.

The report's most expensive solution was an aerial tram, which the city took up, to date spending \$750,000 on study funding. The engineering firm Stantec is conducting the work. With the unveiling of [proposed routes](#), the study is now in phase II; findings will be presented to the city council at a future date.



An aerial tram gondola, as pictured by the Griffith Park Aerial Transit Study

Visual blight across a pristine landscape

Envision this: a two-mile-long tram replete with cable-driven gondolas supported by a few dozen massive support beams strewn across the park. The ugly scar marring the vast 4,200-acres of unspoiled terrain would introduce a Disneyesque aspect to the land. The virgin terrain's diverse habitat and wildlife would be interrupted and spoiled.

A further blight on the Mount Lee slope placed just beneath the sign: a huge viewing platform crammed with cellphone wielding tourists. And no doubt a coffee cart.

This is not what Colonel Griffith J. Griffith, who gifted the land to the City in 1896, had in mind. He envisioned the extensive hills as being an “open space – rustic and available to all.” A ticketed tourist attraction was never mentioned.

The city seemed to come to its senses about how it should consider this treasured land in 2014 when Mayor Eric Garcetti signed [The Vision for Griffith Park](#). The document stressed keeping commercial enterprises, like an amusement park-like aerial tram, out of the rugged hills.

A hotel in Griffith Park

About a decade before that, the 2005 Griffith Park Master Plan ([the Melendrez Plan](#)) proposed to partially commercialize the park. Besides aerial trams (yes, more than one), the plan included a sports complex and a hotel.

An outraged public soundly rejected the idea. And now, the ill-advised aerial tram proposal is back.

The allure of an aerial tram is understandable but certainly misguided. The Hollywood sign is L.A.’s premier iconic symbol, akin to New York City’s Statue of Liberty (in an L.A. sense). Millions of visitors, and most especially foreign tourists, crave that coveted up-close selfie moment with those titanic white letters.



A rendering of one of four proposed aerial tram routes / Photo courtesy Friends of Griffith Park

A hike-worthy landmark

Grabbing that shot takes just a bit of hiking – and what’s wrong with that? Nothing, long as the city coordinates a better plan that helps tourists access the landmark.

The Dixon Plan includes solid ideas: optimal ways to direct visitors to trails, the extension of shuttles, better hiking access points that can pare traffic, and the creation of an official city Hollywood Sign website that makes getting to the sign a snap (possibly coordinated with the existing [Hollywood Sign Trust website](#)).

And why not a City-sponsored Hollywood sign app? It could include maps that guide tourists via various routes, paired with examples of the kind of selfies they can snap along each of the access trails.

The view of the sign from Griffith Observatory (one of the landmark’s official viewing spots) is not that great—the sign is nearly a mile away. In truth, cellphone photos shot from observatory grounds show the landmark as a white smudge in the distance.

And that’s actually the problem (although a good one in my view): the sign is far away from the city, tucked on the edge of Mount Lee. Most professionally shot tourist photos make the landmark appear as if it looms, hanging above Hollywood like a street ornament. Many tourists are dismayed to learn that those 45-foot tall white letters are actually on a distant mountain rather than an easy stroll from their Sunset Blvd. hotel room.



The Hollywood Sign as seen from a home in Beechwood Canyon / Photo: R. Daniel Foster

Aerial tram's troubled history

The first aerial tram was proposed in the early 1940s, and some work did commence on the project, including the grading of Mt. Hollywood for a restaurant. But World War II sapped funds. The increasingly car-choked 1960s brought more aerial tram proposals.

[Friends of Griffith Park](#), a non-profit steward organization, has drawn heavily on the 2014 “Vision for Griffith Park” in its opposition to the tram. In a [September 24 letter sent to Mayor Garcetti](#), the organization pointed out that several Council-approved strategies to reduce park traffic problems “have gone into the proverbial black hole” (including electric shuttles).

Besides detailing the obvious blight a tram would introduce, the letter questions the city’s wisdom in tackling the multi-million project since it’s now suffering a COVID-19-caused fiscal emergency.

“The City should cut its losses now,” the organization’s opposition letter states. “If none of the \$750,000 contract is recoverable, at least the time and energy of City staff will not further drain already reduced staff budgets.”

Predictable and justifiable public outrage

While numerous other aerial tram concepts have been proposed during the past nearly 80 years, what never changes “is the consistent, predictable outrage expressed by the public in response, all for good reasons,” the Friends of Griffith Park letter states.

Numerous organizations have opposed the tram. The short list: the Los Feliz Neighborhood Council, the Hollywoodland and Lake Hollywood Homeowners Associations, the Los Feliz Improvement Association and the Sierra Club’s Los Angeles chapter.

Take action to oppose the aerial tram

Friends of Griffith Park has created an [opposition letter](#) you can send to local officials; feel free to make the language your own. Included are email addresses and phone numbers for the mayor and City Council members.

You can also state your opposition when taking a [survey](#) conducted by the Griffith Park Aerial Transit Study.

How do Council District 4 candidates feel about an aerial tram? [Friends of Griffith Park asked CD4 candidates Nithya Raman and incumbent David Ryu that question](#), along with inquiries about other attendant issues.

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Top photo of the Hollywood Sign: Thomas Wolf, www.foto-tw.de via Wikimedia Commons

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