

HIGHLAND PALMS

Trees Slated for Cutting Declared City Monument

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Highland Ave.'s controversial palm trees and the grassy traffic islands where they stand were declared the city's 94th historic-cultural monument Wednesday by the Los Angeles Cultural Heritage Board.

But because those trees earmarked for removal are still standing, it was learned, Los Angeles could lose federal matching funds and may be liable for accidents along the tree-lined avenue.

At the same time, CHB officials criticized city engineers for keeping Hancock Park residents who live on Highland in the dark about plans to remove some of the trees to make room for left-turn lanes.

CHB President Carl Dentzel charged that there is a lack of communication between "city people who make things happen and those who pay . . ."

Neighborhood Protest

"Just try to take a tree out in Paris or Mexico City. You can't," he said. "Here We pay more to keep our cities ugly than they do to keep theirs beautiful."

The threatened removal of trees for the \$200,000 street improvement and safety project sparked a neighborhood protest earlier this month and prompted the City Council to order cancellation of the construction contract.

The CHB's declaration of the 1.4-mile-long median strip between Wilshire Blvd. and Melrose Ave. involves 94 *Washingtonia Robusta* and Queen Palms—by coincidence the same number as their CHB declaration.

Normally a board declaration can protect a historic-cultural building

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or site for up to a year provided there is no conflict with plans of another city department.

But because city agencies—the Board of Public Works, its Bureau of Engineering and the Traffic Department—are involved in the improvement program, Dentzel warned that the CHB's action could be challenged.

Called Temporary

"It's no magic formula (to save the trees)," he told members of the Committee to Save the Highland Palms. "It's temporary, at best."

A joint statement by the Bureau of Engineering and Department of Traffic presented at the heritage board's hearing denied that "city government is

out to kill the palm trees . . ."

Actually, said DeForest Iverson, principal assistant division engineer with the bureau's Street and Freeway Design Division, it will be six months to a year before work could proceed on the project, if it does move ahead again.

The board of Public Works, acting on the City Council's orders, has called for new traffic studies and an environmental impact report. It also will conduct public hearings.

As a result of the aborted project, the city's costs—as well as its losses—could be enormous, it was pointed out.

No determination has been made of the city's liability to the contractor for the canceled \$200,443.44 contract, Iverson said.

But, he explained, the city will lose about \$140,000 in federal road funds because another street improvement project cannot be substituted before the end of the current fiscal year.

The Highland Ave. program had qualified for 70% reimbursement under the federal Traffic Operation Program to Increase Capacity and Safety (TOPICS).

20 Other Street Projects

Twenty other Los Angeles street projects have qualified for \$3.5 million this year.

Furthermore, the Board of Public Works, on the basis of a recent state Supreme Court decision, has asked for legal advice about possible city liability for accidents because the project is not going ahead.

"It originally qualified for TOPICS funds because

it was a safety project," Iverson pointed out.

In the meantime Councilman John Ferraro, who previously suggested stop signs may be needed along that section of Highland, told the CHB he planned to look into declassification of the street from its major highway status.

"We may have to slow down traffic completely, and discourage people from using the street," he said.