

CITY OF SAN DIEGO
M E M O R A N D U M

DATE: December 10, 2003

TO: Chairperson Schwartz and Members of the Historical Resources Board

FROM: Teri Delcamp, Senior Planner/Historian

SUBJECT: ITEM 5 – Coronado Belt Line (LDR 40-0378)

BACKGROUND

This item was continued from the October 23, 2003, meeting so that additional information could be submitted to the Historical Resources Board by interested members of the public. The Save Our Heritage Organisation (SOHO) submitted a rebuttal report prepared by Ronald V. May on December 3, 2003. That report was distributed to Boardmembers with the initial mailout for the December 19, 2003 meeting.

Staff reviewed the rebuttal report, discussed the Coronado Belt Line with State Office of Historic Preservation staff and members of the State Historical Resources Commission, and reviewed Caltrans' "General Guidelines for Identifying and Evaluating Historic Landscapes" (cited and utilized in the rebuttal report's analysis). After due consideration of the information, staff's recommendation remains unchanged. This memorandum briefly responds to issues raised in the rebuttal report.

ANALYSIS

Industrial Archaeology Landscape within a Geographic District

The rebuttal report indicates that the Coronado Belt Line should be considered in the context of historic landscape and geographic district. Staff clarified with Mr. May that only the railroad itself is proposed for nomination by SOHO, not the broader cultural landscape context in which it is located. Because the cultural landscape context is not proposed for designation, the application of the "General Guidelines for Identifying and Evaluating Historic Landscapes" is irrelevant. While the railroad features could possibly contribute to a broader area that includes vegetation, landscape, salt ponds and berms, etc., this broader area is not proposed for designation at this time, and so has not been adequately identified or evaluated.

The statements in the rebuttal report regarding potential Native American significance and Chinese railroad labor significance address areas outside of the proposed designation

boundary and are speculative and unfounded. If the broader landscape were actually being proposed for designation at this time, more extensive archeological study as well as research into the history of the Chinese laborers – where they worked and lived – would need to be completed. Citing speculative and incomplete archaeological investigation, and identifying the railroad itself as a contributor to a broader landscape that is not being proposed for designation, is not sufficient to support the designation of the railroad line as an individual site at this time. This holds true whether the period of significance is the more limited period of 1888-1908 identified by staff or the broader period extending to 1953 identified in the rebuttal report.

Significance of the Coronado Railroad as it Relates to the Continuous Growth of the Community

The rebuttal report discusses the importance of the Coronado Belt Line in the context of a broader landscape which is not being proposed for designation. Moreover, as staff had indicated in the original staff report, the companies identified in the rebuttal report as part of the important industrial landscape are the Hercules Powder Plant which was in Chula Vista, North Island Naval Air Station which is in Coronado and Rohr Aircraft Company in Chula Vista. In fact, of the approximately 7.5 mile remaining segment of the Coronado Belt Line, only about 1.5 miles of it is within the boundary of the City of San Diego and is the only portion over which the HRB has any jurisdiction. This portion, referred to as Segment E, is at the Western Salt Works. The Salt Works is now within San Diego's boundaries (as of 1955), but it was not within the city boundaries until after the end of the proposed broader period of significance. In addition, in the prior evaluation of the Salt Works' potential National Register significance, the railroad was not identified as a contributing feature. What is clear to staff is that the portions of the Coronado Belt Line that would have clear significance to San Diego no longer exist, and the portions that do exist with some integrity are not within San Diego's boundaries during the proposed period of significance.

The report does provide new information that was not previously presented regarding the Hercules Power Plant and Rohr Aircraft Company. However, statements in the report that reference "the continuing landscape associated with the view of the Hercules Powder Plant from the Coronado Railroad" have only commemorative significance at best since the plant no longer exists. The plant of the former Rohr Aircraft Company still exists with some modern intrusions, but the railroad should be considered as part of the overall significance of that site. Again, these could be considerations for the City of Chula Vista's designation activities, but are not within the purview of the City of San Diego's considerations.

Historical Persons

Certainly John Spreckels, Elisha Babcock and Hampton Story are significant persons. In order for a property to be designated for an association with an important historical person, it must illustrate a person's important achievements. The only remaining portion of the Coronado Belt Line that is currently within San Diego is the segment through the

Salt Works property. The entire Coronado Belt Line line is severely lacking in integrity because the majority of it is gone. Because of the overall line's lacking integrity, given that the terminus sections in both San Diego and Coronado that could have illustrated these men's achievements are gone, the proposed segment should not be designated for an association with Spreckels, Babcock or Story.

Architecture

The rebuttal report contends that the Coronado Belt Line segment is significant as the best surviving example of a short line railroad in San Diego. The short line railroads came about with the boom of the late 1880s in San Diego. With only a third of its original alignment still remaining, the Coronado Belt Line no longer retains enough integrity of design, materials, association and setting to be representative of the short lines of this early period. The line itself was altered after the 1916 flood, and later in the 1940s and 1950s. The setting along the line has also been altered with modern structures. If considered as part of a broader cultural landscape with appropriate broader boundaries and supported by additional archaeological and historical study and research, there is a possibility the San Diego segment could be designated as a contributor to a district. However, staff's position remains that the 1.5 mile segment through San Diego does not retain sufficient integrity to be designated as an individual site.

OTHER CONSIDERATIONS

On page 36 of the rebuttal report, there is a statement that "MTDB does not intend to allow a bikeway in the Right-of-Way". A letter was received from MTDB refuting this statement and indicating that license agreements are in place and the design drawings are underway. The letter is attached in the correspondence being transmitted with this staff report.

There have been a number of Emails received by staff that are also being transmitted as attachments to this staff report. Some of the messages refer to political pressures, and one includes phrases such as "political corruption", "political favors", "manipulation" and "bribe(s)" and implying that the HRB may be tempted to make a decision based on political issues rather than historic issues.

This particular designation consideration is an extremely difficult and sensitive one, especially given the deep amount of interest and emotional connections to it on the part of interested parties. The process of staff's analysis and conclusions was complex and difficult, but focused only on historic issues. As is obvious from the differing conclusions presented in the various prior and current evaluations, all completed by respected professionals in the field of historic preservation, historic preservation individuals can disagree about the significance of a site.

The HRB is comprised of individuals from an assortment of backgrounds that bring different perspectives and expertise to designation decisions, including those Boardmembers that are required to meet the state's professional qualifications. The HRB

is tasked with making a determination, based on the evidence at hand related to historic issues, as to whether or not the segment of the Coronado Belt Line within the City of San Diego's boundaries should be designated as a landmark. As such, the HRB may or may not concur with staff's recommendation or the conclusions in the rebuttal report. This is why the City has a 15-member body that makes decisions within a public forum on historical designations. The HRB should consider the facts about the merits of the designation, and not consider the project, in rendering its decision.

CONCLUSION

Based on the information submitted and staff's own field check, it is recommended that the HRB note and file the historical evaluation of the Coronado Belt Line.

Teri Delcamp
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Attachments:

1. Staff Report P-03-288, dated October 14, 2003
2. Correspondence from interested members of the public