

Malibu Triathlon at risk of cancelation: An endangered fish is in the way

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For decades, thousands of athletes have gathered each fall at Malibu's Zuma Beach to swim, then bike and run along the coast in a race that has raised millions for local charities, including Children's Hospital Los

Angeles.

But with less than two weeks to go before this year's Malibu Triathlon, the event is at risk of being canceled due to a flooded underpass on the course that has since become home to an endangered fish known as the tidewater goby and a city law that specifies that nearby residents must be notified of the race route 32 days beforehand.

By the time race organizers could devise an alternative race route that avoided the tidewater goby, the 32-day notification deadline had passed, and city officials denied a permit for the triathlon, scheduled for Sept. 30 and Oct. 1.

On Monday night, Malibu's Planning Commission listened to an appeal from the competition's organizers and heard about a shorter bike route that would avoid the flooded underpass. But the commissioners deadlocked on the appeal, voting 2-2, thereby rejecting it.

"This is an event that brings families and communities together," said Skylar Peak, a planning commissioner who voted in favor of greenlighting the triathlon. "We need to figure out a way to make this happen, not a way to deny this from happening."

"The problem that we have here is that this is not just about bureaucracy," said Kraig Hill, a member of the Planning Commission who voted to deny the permit. "We are being asked to break the law—the noticing requirement is the law," he said of the 32-day notice of an event. "We can't just ignore it because we think it's a good cause."

In a statement to race participants, the company that owns the Malibu Triathlon said, "We are appealing that decision and are confident we will be able to hold the safe, enjoyable, and inspiring event we all want while helping some of the most vulnerable in our society."

A spokesman for the city confirmed that officials expected organizers to submit a follow-up appeal, which would be discussed and voted on at a City Council meeting scheduled for Monday. Members of the public will be able to offer their comments at the meeting.

The uncertainty surrounding this year's event is a result of winter's record rainstorms. For years, the triathlon's bicycling course has run through the Zuma Beach undercrossing at Busch Drive, but the series of storms flooded the underpass. The roadway was not immediately cleared, and in time, the tidewater goby took up residence.

For this year's race, organizers submitted their permit application in January, then filed it in person with the city of Malibu in early March. They included a list of residents within a 500-foot radius of the proposed course—a list that would be used to mail notifications to residents 32 days beforehand.

It does not appear that the city reached out to race organizers about the flooded underpass, but it's unclear that the city was required to do so. The underpass is controlled by L.A. County's Department of Beaches and Harbors, and in past years when the underpass flooded, organizers of the triathlon constructed a temporary ramp for bikes to travel over, organizers said.

Brennan Lindner, the race director, said that, in mid-August, city planning officials emailed a list of outstanding items for their permit to be approved but made no mention of the Zuma Beach underpass, according to correspondence filed with the city.

Around this time, county officials told organizers that the underpass would probably be unusable for the race, setting off a frantic effort by organizers to work with various government agencies to develop alternative routes.

"It's forced us to adapt as quickly as we possibly can," Lindner told the Planning Commission on Monday night.

By the end of August, L.A. County's Department of Beaches and Harbors confirmed that state Fish and Wildlife officials and the regional water board had directed the county to not disturb the tidewater goby.

Only in the final week of August did the city confirm to race organizers that the Zuma Beach underpass would not be cleared, nor could a temporary ramp be installed.

On Aug. 31, triathlon officials submitted an alternative route, but it was rejected by the [city](#) on Sept. 5. On Sept. 8, race officials submitted another revised route, paring down the bike course to a series of loops roughly between Trancas Canyon and Westward Beach roads. The same day, [city officials](#) contended it was too late: The requirement to notify residents within 500 feet had passed Aug. 24, so the permit was denied.

Race organizers appealed the decision, which resulted in Monday's Planning Commission meeting in which scores of community members stepped up to the dais and begged the panel to approve the event.

"God bless the tidewater goby, but let's be honest, you guys have the power—you need to allow this to go forward," said Pamela Conley Ulich, a former mayor of Malibu. "You can't deny it on this technicality."

A representative for L.A. County Supervisor Lindsey Horvath urged the commission to allow the triathlon to proceed.

"We cannot let bureaucracy prevent us from bringing resources to those who need it most, nor stop us from returning to these yearly celebrations ... that have been taken from us in the pandemic," said Zachary Gaidzik,

one of Horvath's deputies.

All commissioners expressed general support for the event, but two who voted to reject the triathlon's appeal insisted their hands were tied by the legal requirement to notify residents 32 days before an event.

"I wish that somebody had really jumped on this a couple weeks earlier," said John G. Mazza, who voted to deny the permit.

The proposed, modified course that avoids the underpass has been approved by Caltrans, the L.A. County sheriff and the Beaches and Harbors Department and entails riding the length of the Zuma Beach parking lot down to the Point Dume parking lot and repeating the loop three to four times, depending on the [race](#).

"It's the safest route we've come up with," Lindner said Monday night, highlighting that no residential or commercial driveways would be blocked.

The bureaucratic morass injects uncertainty into an event that annually draws more than 4,000 participants, including teams consisting of employees from Disney, Warner Bros. and Netflix, along with several actors, musicians and celebrities.

"There are thousands of people who would be disappointed if it doesn't happen," said Gerry Rodrigues, founder of Tower 26, a Los Angeles-based program that trains triathletes and swimmers. "Any participant has trained for months, and they are ready to go."

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