

Conservation groups cry foul over planned Sepulveda Basin music festival

LAKE BALBOA >> It would be a three-day music festival to rival Coachella, only this one would be staged in the heart of the San Fernando Valley.

But the proposed AngelFest — a family music extravaganza that could draw up to 65,000 concertgoers per day this fall to the Sepulveda Basin Recreation Area — has run afoul of bird watchers and conservation groups.

“It’s absolutely inappropriate, adjacent to the Wildlife Reserve, without a buffer to sensitive habitat,” said Muriel Kotin of the San Fernando Valley Audubon Society, which [gathered nearly 3,000 online signatures](#) last week in protest.

“There will be many, many birds that will be frightened away from the area.”

Nearly three years in the making, AngelFest is billed as a family-friendly music, food and cultural festival in and around Woodley Park that aims to celebrate the city and music of Los Angeles. If all goes well, it would return through fall 2018.

Pending approval from the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, which manages the Valley flood control basin in Lake Balboa, the festival would run the weekend of Oct. 7 through Oct. 9.

Five stages between Woodley Avenue and the 405 Freeway north of the Wildlife Reserve would focus on music from the 1950s to present from 10 a.m. to 11 p.m. While no electronic dance music or hip-hop music is planned, city officials said, there may be fireworks and pyrotechnics.

Permission has been granted to the festival promoter, Make Good Group LLC, by the parks department. A 338-page environmental assessment is expected to be released next month by the Army Corps, followed by a period for public comment.

Critics say that, in addition to affecting a sensitive wildlife habitat of as many as 200 species of birds, the festival could tie up the northeast basin for up to 26 days during the concert setup and tear-down. That means popular picnic areas, cricket

fields, archery ranges, the Japanese tea garden and Wildlife Reserve could be off-limits for certain stretches, with parking filling up lots at local golf courses and as far away as Pierce College. However, Lake Balboa, and its universal playground, would remain open.

Supporters include the cash-strapped Los Angeles Department of Recreation and Parks, its fundraising foundation and local neighborhood councils. They see AngelFest as a boon for the Sepulveda Basin, which would benefit directly from most of the city user fees and share of ticket proceeds.

"There's been no music festivals in Los Angeles, period," said Valley parks Superintendent Charles Singer, who has helped vet the producer of AngelFest, which he said could highlight such L.A. bands as the Red Hot Chili Peppers. While there have been festivals in the Los Angeles area, such as FYF Fest, Jay Z's Made in America Festival and various electronic dance music festivals, none have been on the same scale as Coachella.

"We believe a majority of Angelenos would enjoy a concert in a beautiful area, with easy access to transportation, and a revenue stream that supports basin projects," Singer said.

As it stands, the Make Good Group would pay city parks a user fee of \$250,000, of which 95 percent would be spent on Sepulveda Basin upgrades. Singer said city parks also would receive a small percentage of proceeds from festival ticket sales.

Given that between 40,000 and 65,000 people a day could attend the festival in its first year, that could mean between \$300,000 to \$400,000 could be spent on a new Sepulveda Basin dog park and bike path lights, broken fences, kiosks and security for the Wildlife Reserve, proponents say.

If held for three years, AngelFest could mean more than \$1 million in basin upgrades, while providing more than 1,200 temporary jobs each fall.

The Los Angeles-based Make Good Group has produced hundreds of large live events, music tours, festivals and music-centered TV specials, according to its website, with such clients as the Philadelphia Eagles, Apple and Save the Children.

Make Good founder Tim Sexton, who produced the global Live 8 benefit concerts more than a decade ago with more than 1,000 musicians and 3 billion viewers, was out of town Friday and unavailable for comment.

"I believe it's a win-win for the city," said Linda Gravani, president of the Lake Balboa Neighborhood Council, which approved the AngelFest proposal and is pushing for new dog park lights. "The park is for everybody."

"What it comes down to is it's dogs against the birds," adds Tom Riley, another Lake Balboa Neighborhood Council board member. "That's where the real fight is."

Councilwoman Nury Martinez, who represents the basin, has remained "neutral" on AngelFest.

"I've asked the event coordinators to meet with people who are involved or impacted by their proposal, to hear about their concerns, ideas and suggestions for the event," she said, in a statement.

Last month, the Resource Conservation District of the Santa Monica Mountains, which includes the basin, weighed in against the music festival.

Meanwhile, area bird watchers have risen up to fight an influx of tens of thousands of visitors to the Sepulveda Basin, something they say could inflict long-term damage to Woodley Park, including its nearby reserve specially set aside for urban wildlife.

They say three days of concert noise could prevent roughly 50 white pelicans, which arrive from Utah in the fall, from breeding. Despite double fencing around the Wildlife Reserve, the Audubon Society fears a massive music festival with its day-and-night concert crowds, equipment and parking, also will remove 100 acres of habitat surrounding it now used by owls, hawks, and other birds for breeding, foraging and roosting.

Last week, members of a Sepulveda Basin Wildlife Steering Committee said they were shocked that permit negotiations for AngelFest had gone on for years behind closed doors without informing the environmental members of the advisory committee.

"I feel blindness descending upon this room, with dollar signs in their eyes, on the impact to the Wildlife Reserve," said Mark Osokow, a biologist and Valley Audubon board member, to the committee, which tabled a vote on the festival after Singer requested they first read the pending Army Corps' environmental assessment draft.

"I think you're underestimating the impact on the birds," he said. "What I think is needed is an environmental impact statement and full vetting process (for the festival), year after year."

Editor's note: This story has been updated to clarify that while there have been music festivals in the Los Angeles, none have been on the same scale as Coachella.