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Lagoon restoration hits halfway mark

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By Jeff O'Brien
Reporter

DEL MAR — DEL MAR — Local residents met with the engineers and biologists behind the \$86-million San Dieguito Lagoon Restoration Project at a public meeting Nov. 14 at Powerhouse Community Center in Del Mar.

According to Mike Furby, president of Marathon Construction — the firm working on the restoration — the massive undertaking has reached the halfway point of completion.

“Every project has big challenges, as this one has,” Furby said. “We had an eight-month delay due to permitting issues, and birds during the nesting season have always been a big deal during construction.”

Furby said an extensive team of biologists, bird monitors and consultants has ensured the protection of the various endangered and migratory birds that nest in the lagoon, such as the snowy plover, the endangered California least tern and the light footed clapper rail.

“We were on course and able to do work around them,” Furby said. “We adapted as a team and the project continued.”

Construction began in September 2006 with one of the primary goals being the permanent reopening of the mouth of the San Dieguito Lagoon.

For years, the lagoon mouth would often get cut off from the Pacific Ocean due to clogged sediment. As a result, some areas of the lagoon became cesspools of stagnant water, causing bird and fish hatcheries to suffer heavily due to the lack of fresh nutrients.

Work has also been under way on constructing berms along the river, which will prevent silt buildup in the case of a large flood. In addition, four new nesting sites are being created within the subtidal basin to provide a safer habitat for migratory birds.

Furby said that the restoration effort, which has been spearheaded by the San Dieguito River Park Joint Powers Authority and Southern California Edison, was divided into three main areas stretching from the mouth of the San Dieguito River near the Del Mar Fairgrounds to the inland areas just south of Via de la Valle and east of Interstate 5.

“The next big challenge for the project will be excavating approximately 1 million cubic yards just south of Via de la Valle,” Furby said. “We’ve done about half of that so far. More than 1 million cubic yards of material has already been excavated from the lagoon west of Interstate 5, where we have been constructing berms and nesting sites.”

According to Samir Tanius, project manager with Southern California Edison, the former Grand Avenue Bridge will also become a component of the project.

The Grand Avenue Bridge, located west of Interstate 5 within the lagoon, was built in 1943 to provide access to what was then a naval facility on the land.

Tanius said the bridge was slated for demolition for several years, but the San Dieguito River Park Joint Powers Authority decided to salvage materials from the bridge and use them toward reconstructing it as a viewing platform.

“The bridge has been torn down and it’s going to become a viewpoint that will be slightly elevated, so people will be able to park their cars and have a view of the lagoon,” Tanius said.

Dick Bobertz, executive director of the San Dieguito River Park, said that plans are in the works to construct a new

interpretive center at the corner of Via de la Valle and San Andreas Drive, which will provide visitor access to a planned network of trails that will run alongside the restored lagoon basin.

“That will be the major access point to the trail system, and it will include parking for hikers as well as equestrian users,” Bobertz said.

Planners are hoping that the entire restoration effort will be completed by the end of 2009.

For more information about the project, visit www.sdlagoon.com.

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