

DEL MAR TIMES

Big year for a small town

Wednesday, December 31, 2008

By Laura Petersen

Del Mar may be the region's smallest city, but as one of the most unique and spirited towns on the San Diego County coastline it certainly has made remarkable strides in 2008 to improve the quality of life.

Much of the focus was on revitalizing downtown Camino del Mar and 15th Street, an effort that promises to dominate the city's agenda in 2009 as well.

After the Kennedy Smith study was released in February highlighting the city's strengths and weaknesses - 50 percent of visitors come for coffee - the city council issued a battle cry to reinvigorate downtown Del Mar, which the council sees as critical to the city's survival. Throughout the year, the council adopted a series of ordinances to help businesses, such as loosening regulations for signage and outdoor dining.

The city will continue to work on a downtown specific plan in 2009 and decide how to proceed with the temporary ban on non-retail uses on the ground floor along Camino del Mar.

Rollercoaster ride

The L'Auberge Resort and Spa's \$25 million remodel was mostly completed by June, but the other end of the city saw momentous development as well.

After years of negotiating with the Del Mar Union School District, the city purchased the Ninth Street Shores property for \$8.5 million. Heroic fundraising efforts garnered the first \$5 million, however, the city had to contribute the remainder in November.

Fundraising will continue this year as master planning for the site commences in early 2009. The Friends of Del Mar Parks are working on a "41 for 36" campaign to raise \$1,500 per household. If every household contributes \$41 for the next 36 months the debt would retire.

Across the street at the old gas station site, the mixed-use Garden Del Mar proposal took quite a rollercoaster ride in 2008, with the developers almost walking away at one point. But consensus on the design and public benefits was reached and more than 85 percent of the community gave the thumbs up on Proposition G, which green-lighted the construction to begin this year.

But development was not the only issue making headlines in 2008.

Goodbyes

Topping the list was a sad farewell to influential councilman Jerry Finnell, who died of cancer in February. The highly regarded Del Martian was honored at a moving memorial service at the Powerhouse Community Center attended by hundreds.

School shake-ups

2008 was a dramatic year for the Del Mar Union School District.



The 2008 San Diego County Fair drew the second-largest crowd on record.
Amy Lynne Bowes/file



Shoppers walk along Camino del Mar.
Danielle Vinland/file



A dredge opens a portion of the restored San Dieguito Lagoon.
Danielle Vinland/file

In February, Del Mar Union School District Board of Trustees bought out 10-year Superintendent Tom Bishop's contract.

Bishop's departure led to some mixed emotions with district employees and parents. Trustee Linda Crawford's emotions were not mixed. She resigned from her post after Bishop's ouster, ending her 11-year term.

District parents and staff were taxed to evaluate the kind of leader they were looking for in a series of workshops and questionnaires. Candidates were then scouted in a nationwide search, eventually finding new Superintendent Sharon McClain.

Trustee Crawford's interim replacement, Doug Perkins, would then be appointed after an unprecedented public interview session with seven candidates at Ocean Air School.

Perkins was officially appointed to his seat in September, along with new trustee Comischell Rodriguez. Rodriguez will fill the seat left vacant by Janet Lamborghini, a 16-year member of the school board.

The San Dieguito Union High School District also got a new superintendent this year. Kenneth Noah was appointed after the resignation of Peggy Lynch.



Superintendent Sharon McClain

Busy summer

On a lighter note, the U.S. Open golf tournament came to town in June with much fan fair, causing the San Diego County Fair to hold off opening for one day. The "Summer of Sports" started slow, but ended with its second highest attendance on record.

The Del Mar Race Meet quickly followed, opening with its best-attended Opening Day ever and a faster Polytrack surface. But the worsening economy led to modest declines in on-track attendance and handle for the season.

Environmental progress

Despite tightening wallets, the community recognized the importance of protecting its most valuable resource, the ocean, and passed clean water fee rate increases in September.

Many residents also watched eagerly as the San Dieguito lagoon and wetlands restoration progressed and began to flourish.

New faces

A changing of the guard took place at City Hall as longtime city council members Henry Abarbanel and Dave Druker stepped down from the dais and fresh blood came in the form of engineer Mark Filanc and scientist Donald Mosier.

The new council faces quite an aggressive agenda and it's bound to be an eventful year as the city celebrates its 50th anniversary in 2009.

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