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San Dieguito River Park Progress Exceeds Expectations

By Joe Tash



This section of the Coast to Crest Trail, in the Del Dios Gorge, was completed about three months ago.

The restoration in the 1980s of 75 acres of habitat in the San Dieguito Lagoon west of Interstate 5 in Del Mar proved so successful that residents of the North County coast began imagining an even bolder plan — restoring a 55-mile corridor from the beach to the base of Volcan Mountain, north of Julian.

“If you want a vision, you might as well dream big,” said Karen Berger of Solana Beach, one of the early volunteers in an effort that eventually created the San Dieguito River Park, a park and trail system that will one day provide a path for hikers, bicyclists and horseback riders to traverse the entire 55-mile length of the San Dieguito River from its source on Volcan Mountain to its mouth at the Pacific Ocean.

Berger and a group of like-minded residents started meeting at each others’ homes in the mid-1980s, and the outgrowth of those gatherings was the establishment of three organizations: The San Dieguito River Valley Conservancy, the San Dieguito River Park Joint Powers Authority, and the Friends of the San Dieguito River Valley. Together, Berger said, the three groups have formed a “three-legged stool” that has propelled the creation of the park.

This year, the joint powers authority — an independent government agency formed by the County and City of San Diego along with the cities of Del Mar, Solana Beach, Poway and Escondido — turns 20. Over the past two decades, much has been accomplished, including the acquisition of 20,000 acres of land, and the completion of 35 miles of trail, along with numerous conservation and restoration projects.

Berger, who has recently stepped back from the project to let others carry it forward, said she is delighted with the progress she has witnessed.

“It was something I didn’t think would happen in my lifetime. I thought it would take 100 years. So I’m extremely proud of what has been accomplished,” said Berger.

When the joint powers authority was launched in 1989, about 40,000 acres of the park’s planned 80,000-acre footprint was owned by a combination of local, state and federal government agencies.

“We had a good start,” said Dick Bobertz, the JPA’s executive director for the past 12 years.

Since then, the JPA has received more than \$157 million — mostly from federal and state grants — which it has used to buy land, build trails, restore habitat and complete other projects.

The park suffered a major setback in 2007 when the Witch and Guejito fires burned down its headquarters building, destroyed a historic farmhouse the park had restored, and also ravaged bridges, signs, kiosks, benches and other structures along the trail.

Currently, at the west end, the “Coast to Crest” trail begins next to the Del Mar Fairgrounds. Bobertz said eventually, it will run all the way to the beach. The trail extends east under Interstate 5, and there are several segments either completed or in progress that take it past the polo grounds at El Camino Real. The JPA is also working on an \$86 million project to dredge the lagoon on the east side of the freeway to allow tidal action to flush the lagoon, and to replant the area.

After a gap of several miles, the trail picks up at the west end of Crosby Estates, and continues 23 miles to the San Pasqual Valley, past the San Diego Wild Animal Park. The only gap in the trail’s central segment is west of the Lake Hodges Dam, where the JPA will soon complete a short stretch of trail complicated by its location on the side of a cliff.

At the east end is an 8.9-mile segment from Volcan Mountain to Highway 79, Bobertz said.

If all goes according to plan, the entire 55-mile Coast to Crest trail could be completed within the next 10 years, Bobertz said.

Along the way, the JPA must deal with a variety of issues, such as negotiations with reluctant landowners, the impact of the economic recession, and a dispute with the San Diego Polo Club, which leases land from the city of San Diego to the east of El Camino Real.

“We call it fondly our 55 miles of details,” Bobertz said.

According to Bobertz, the polo club has taken over a 1.5-mile stretch of trail, which it plows to create a soft surface where polo ponies can be taken to cool down after being exercised. The problem is that the ground is too soft to be suitable for hikers or bicyclists, and the polo club has also surrounded the area with a fence.

“They basically commandeered the public trail,” Bobertz said.

After a six-year battle involving the JPA, the city of San Diego and the polo club, the issue appears close to resolution.

On July 9, the polo club submitted a letter to the city, agreeing to relocate its exercise trail, and “re-compact” the trail for use by the public. The club seeks to move the exercise trail to a new location on its leased property, and it has also agreed to re-vegetate habitat areas near the river channel that have been disturbed.

Christopher Collins, a board member with the San Diego Polo Club, said, “We’ve made a number of attempts to satisfy everybody’s needs and find a mutually beneficial alignment for the trail and still have a place to exercise the polo ponies. I think this latest proposal is a real win-win for all the groups that will work out great.”

While Bobertz is optimistic the dispute can be resolved, he said the JPA believes the polo club should re-surface the trail with decomposed granite, an expense the club has indicated it is not willing to absorb. Such a surface would allow the segment of trail to meet accessibility standards for the disabled, Bobertz said.

“We’ll continue to push for that,” he said. “Otherwise, it sounds like we’re making progress.”

Collins said the issue has already gone before an administrative law judge, who had previously told the club to restore the public trail to where it had been when the club’s lease began.

“The judge asked us to put (the trail) where it was and that’s what we’ve agreed to do. They want us to go beyond and put in new improvements that were never anticipated or required.”

Bobertz said his favorite segment of the Coast to Crest trail, which has not been developed yet, is in Santa Ysabel.

“It’s an incredible boulder-strewn canyon with 70-foot drop-offs and boulders the size of houses,” he said. “It will be a major challenge to put a trail in there. It’s really out in the wild where hardly anyone has been.”

Another favorite, he said, which has been completed, is called “Raptor Ridge,” and is located to the west of the San Pasqual Valley. Those heading east are treated to a panoramic view of the valley and the Wild Animal Park before the trail descends, he said, and wind currents bring eagles and hawks to eye-level alongside the trail.

Bobertz, who has a background in landscape architecture and planning with government agencies, considers his current job the perfect “career capper.”

“It’s a dream job from my perspective,” he said.

He attributes the park’s success to the decision to create a JPA with a full-time staff, and the groups and individuals who have contributed their time to planning, building and maintaining the trails.

“The progress the River Park has made is due to a large extent to the volunteer help we’ve had,” he said.

The River Park JPA will hold a three-day design open house from 1-3 p.m. on Friday, July 17; and from 9-10 a.m. on Saturday, July 18, and Sunday, July 19, to receive suggestions and comments regarding a planned San Dieguito Lagoon nature center. The open house will be held at the project site, east of San Andres Drive and south of Via De La Valle. For more information, visit www.sdrp.org.