

Pier's time has arrived

Restored bridge over San Dieguito Lagoon to be christened

By **Tanya Mannes**

Union-Tribune Staff Writer

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DEL MAR — Instead of being demolished as originally planned, Del Mar's 67-year-old Grand Avenue Bridge has been restored as a pier with benches where people can sit and enjoy the beauty of newly restored wetlands.

The wooden bridge on San Dieguito Drive is about a quarter-mile southeast of the Del Mar Fairgrounds and juts into the San Dieguito Lagoon, which is undergoing an \$86 million restoration. The bridge, which has been shortened from 150 feet to 100, is lined with interpretive illustrations of birds and plants found in the lagoon.

The Friends of the San Dieguito River Valley will host a ceremony tomorrow to celebrate the bridge renovation. The Grand Avenue platform offers a sweeping view of the west end of the river valley, which includes the lagoon.

"When you're out there, it's almost like you're on an island or a boat," San Diego County Supervisor Pam Slater-Price said. "You can really appreciate the area."

The pier remains partially surrounded by a fence while crews add a wheelchair-accessible entrance and finish parking in the next couple of months.

Although not an official historical site, the bridge has an interesting history. It dates to World War II, when Del Mar Fairgrounds buildings served as barracks, galleys and mess halls for the Navy.

Built in 1942, the bridge provided access to a U.S. Navy blimp airfield constructed on wetlands east of the Del Mar Fairgrounds, according to an environmental impact report for the project.

The blimps were used to spot Japanese submarines. Based in Santa Ana and Moffett Field in the Bay Area, the blimps refueled at Del Mar and then conducted anti-submarine patrols along the coast, up to 100 miles offshore.

After the war, the blimp field was converted to a small airport by the county, which purchased the land from the Navy for \$1. The airport was shut down in 1959 in anticipation of the construction of nearby Interstate 5.

In 2000, the old bridge was targeted for demolition, but community activist Jacqueline Winterer pushed to save it.

Winterer, president of Friends of the San Dieguito River Valley and a former Del Mar mayor, suggested preserving a portion of the bridge after a trip to the East Coast, where she had toured a boardwalk built for bird-watching.

"I thought, we already have this boardwalk – why tear it down?" Winterer said.

The lagoon is home to migratory and salt marsh birds as well as raptors, fish, reptiles and mammals ranging from mice to coyotes.

Winterer proposed the idea to the San Dieguito River Park Joint Powers Authority, an agency with representatives from the county and five city governments. The agency is responsible for acquiring land for a 50-mile-long open space park along the San Dieguito River from Del Mar to Volcan Mountain near Julian.

Slater-Price, a joint-powers authority board member, immediately liked the idea of restoring the bridge. She pushed through a county grant of \$35,000, which covered a portion of the project.

The total cost for the bridge work was not available because it was rolled into a contract with Marathon Construction, which is handling a large portion of the \$86 million lagoon restoration, officials said.

A local architect, Don Coordt, developed a plan to shorten Grand Avenue and use wood from the dismantled section to repair portions that were weak. The wood was also used for raising the railings to meet safety standards.

"He was extraordinarily respectful of the architecture of the bridge, which is very simple," Winterer said.

The wetlands project is restoring 150 acres within a 440-acre area extending from the lagoon's outlet at the beach in Del Mar to El Camino Real about 2 miles inland. After years of planning, construction began in 2005. The project is funded by Southern California Edison and San Diego Gas & Electric Co.

The power companies are required to pay for lagoon restoration to make up for environmental damage caused by the San Onofre Nuclear Generating Station. They will maintain the wetlands preserve until 2050, when the role will be assumed by the joint-powers authority.



Interpretive illustrations of birds and plants line the Grand Avenue Bridge over San Dieguito Lagoon, which is southeast of the Del Mar Fairgrounds. - CHARLIE NEUMAN / Union-Tribune



Details

Grand Avenue Bridge

What: Officials will gather to celebrate the conversion of the old bridge to a viewing platform for the San Dieguito Lagoon, which is undergoing an \$86 million wetlands restoration.

When: 2 p.m. tomorrow
Sunday

Where: Grand Avenue Bridge on San Dieguito Drive southeast of the Del Mar Fairgrounds.

Parking: Free, in the dirt lot at the southeast corner of San Dieguito Drive and Jimmy Durante Boulevard.