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FRONT PAGE • UP FRONT • NEWS • OPINION • BUSINESS • DINING • HEALTH • ARTS & CULTURE • COMMUNITY • SPORTS • OUTDOORS
What's Inside

Tour of the wetlands is a hit



Jacqueline Winterer leads a group in a tour of the San Dieguito River Valley.

By Laura Petersen

Every Saturday morning for the last six months, members of the Friends of the San Dieguito River Valley have staffed the outdoor learning center at the old Strawberry Stand site on Via de la Valle. They were available to educate the public about the wetland area in our community.

No one came.

Imagine the surprise of the organization's president, Jacqueline Winterer, when she had to turn people away from the first Friends-sponsored bus tour of the San Dieguito Lagoon area on Jan. 13.

"In those six months, there were fewer people than in the first tour bus," Winterer said.

The bus seats 15 people.

It appears the visible dirt movement activity east of Interstate 5 and a few newspaper advertisements announcing the free bus tours have caught people's attention.

The Friends will host two morning bus tours one Saturday a month through June. It's a cozy, two-hour ride around 600 miles of the San Dieguito River Park with knowledgeable guides relating the history of the park and the lagoon restoration project currently under way.

The tour covers a mere one percent of the planned park that spans 55 miles from the river's origin in Volcan Mountain near Julian, to the ocean in Del Mar. A joint powers authority governs the regional park, with nine representatives from surrounding cities.

The lagoon restoration, which began last fall, is the culmination of decades of planning and dedication to preserve diminishing wetlands. A diverse range of habitats will be revitalized, spanning from Dog Beach to El Camino Real, east of Interstate 5, and from Via De la Valle to the edge of Crest Canyon.

Southern Californian Edison is funding most of the \$86 million project, which should be completed by September 2009. The utility company was required to restore 150 acres of wetlands to compensate for negative impacts on fish caused by the San Onofre Nuclear Generation Station.

"I was very interested in seeing what was happening because I saw the tractors and all the movement of dirt," said Del Mar resident Joyce Ashe. "At first, I thought it was going to be a housing development. It's more than I expected, the whole project is incredible."

The bus tour skirts the edge of the restoration project along Via de la Valle, El Camino Real and Jimmy Durante Boulevard. However, a highlight of the tour is a stop on High Bluff Drive, which provides a comprehensive view of the project.

From this vista, the valley sweeps east and west, ringed by foothills and housing communities. The river meanders through the valley, under the freeway, into the lagoon, around the Del Mar Fairgrounds and disappears into the ocean. Winterer points out the nesting areas, future lagoon basin, the disposal sites, and where a Coast-to-Crest Trail will one day connect the ocean and mountains.

"It started as a dream and now it is being accomplished," Winterer said after the tour. "It's very encouraging working for a project that so far has been successful. We're creating a wetland corridor around the river in an area that's very urbanized."

It hasn't been an easy feat.

On the tour, vice president Ann Gardner explained some of the struggles the river park has endured and is battling today.

In 1982, the city of San Diego allowed developer Ray Watt to build Fairbanks Ranch, in exchange for 600 acres of the river valley, which were to be forever preserved as open space. Those 600 acres are now Fairbanks Ranch Country Club and San Diego Polo Club. The city of San Diego, leased 475 acres back to Watt to build the exclusive golf course, for \$1 a year until 2044. The transaction, also known as "the sweetheart deal," spurred an ongoing investigation of all city contracts when it received media attention in 2005.

The country club has made several offers to buy the land, but Winterer is confident San Diego City Council member Scott Peters will protect this parcel from being sold, even though Mayor Jerry Sanders had discussed selling city-owned land to raise money.

Only 70 percent of the proposed river parkland is in public ownership at this time.

Tours are scheduled for 9 a.m. and 11 a.m. on Feb. 17, March 17, April 14, May 19, and June 16. Reservations are required. Call (858) 674-2275, ext. 14, and leave a message with name, phone number and preferred tour time. The February tours are already full.

For more information about the lagoon restoration, go to www.sdlagoon.com.