



CITY OF SANTA BARBARA
PARKS & RECREATION COMMISSION REPORT

AGENDA DATE: September 28, 2011

TO: Parks and Recreation Commission

FROM: Parks Division, Parks and Recreation Department

SUBJECT: Andree Clark Bird Refuge Vegetation Maintenance and Habitat Restoration Project

RECOMMENDATION: That the Commission receive an update on the Andree Clark Bird Refuge Vegetation Maintenance and Habitat Restoration Project.

DISCUSSION:

Background

The Andree Clark Bird Refuge (Bird Refuge) is a 42-acre open space park that provides passive recreation opportunities in the East Beach neighborhood. Bordered on the south and east by Cabrillo Boulevard, the park includes a section of the multi-modal beachway. The park is popular with Santa Barbara residents and visitors, including bicyclists, children, walkers, bird watchers, families, and others.

The park provides habitat for over 200 species of birds and is a well-known wildlife viewing area in the South Coast. The 29-acre Bird Refuge lake includes three islands that support breeding and roosting birds and haul-out locations for the southwest pond turtle, a California Species of Concern. Funds from the Clark Family in 1929 and a Coastal Conservancy Grant in the late 1980's provided funds for park improvements, including wildlife viewing platforms, onsite trails, parking, fencing, habitat restoration, and landscaping.

Historically, the Bird Refuge area was a salt marsh, receiving fresh water from Sycamore Creek. However, construction of the railroad in the 1880's resulted in rerouting Sycamore Creek, thereby isolating the salt marsh. The lake, now an artificially modified estuary, supports palustrine emergent wetlands. The 844-acre watershed is predominantly urban. Runoff from the watershed, including roadways, enters the lake via a mix of open channels and storm drains. The lake is connected to the Pacific Ocean through a tidegate system located adjacent to the north side of Cabrillo Boulevard and passing under that roadway. A closed weir gate in the outflow channel separates the lake from a coastal lagoon at East Beach.

Park Maintenance

General maintenance activities at the Bird Refuge include trail maintenance, landscape maintenance, removal of floating vegetation and vector testing. Marsh vegetation breaks away from rooted locations, floats in the lake and has the potential to clog the weir. Vegetation clumps (floaters) are senescent and/or green. Floaters occur especially during winter storms when elevated water levels lift dislodged vegetation from their resting place and circulating water or wind pushes loose vegetation around the lake. Vegetation transported to the weir can obstruct the overflow that results in flooding along Cabrillo Boulevard. As a preventative measure, staff currently removes floating vegetation with hand equipment from a small boat or pulls it landward from the shore.

In addition to general maintenance in the past five years, the Department has applied for and received two emergency permits for vegetation removal: one in the summer of 2006 to facilitate vector control due to unusually high mosquito counts; and, the other after the 2008 Tea Fire to help restore flow in anticipation of winter rains.

Project Description

The purpose of the Andree Clark Bird Refuge Vegetation Maintenance and Habitat Restoration Project is to restore water flow and conveyance in the lake, reduce the potential for mosquito production and flooding, and improve water quality.

Maintenance activities in coastal wetlands, such as those proposed for the project, require extensive planning and permitting. Permitting agencies have recommended submittal of a five-year permit application to avoid emergency or repeated maintenance permits in the future.

The project will remove 0.86 acres of emergent marsh vegetation from the Bird Refuge and restore 0.86 acres of wetland habitat within the Bird Refuge. The project also includes the removal of silt and vegetation from a grouted sandstone culvert along Old Coast Highway and from a concrete culvert entering the Bird Refuge from the north, for a total of 0.07 acres from the man-made structures. Maintenance activities would occur over a five-year period to keep the affected locations free of marsh vegetation.

Project Design and Permitting

In preparation for the permitting process, the Department contracted with SAIC, Marine Research Specialists, and Cardno ENTRIX to undertake bird surveys, vegetation mapping, and wildlife surveys for the purpose of documenting conditions at the Bird Refuge. During surveys, the federally endangered tidewater goby was discovered in the Bird Refuge lake. Due to that discovery, and the presence of other sensitive biological resources, contractors prepared reports that included avoidance and minimization measures for the protection of sensitive biological resources. These reports were included with permit applications and as a part of environmental review documents. The Department also consulted with several companies to determine a method of marsh

vegetation removal and determined that aquatic construction equipment provided the best method to remove above-water leaves and below-water rhizomes.

The majority of the project area lies in submerged land within the Coastal Zone. Therefore, the project will require a Coastal Development Permit (CDP) from the California Coastal Commission, in addition to a CDP from the Planning Commission. Since the project area is located within wetland habitat, and several federal and state agencies have jurisdiction over those resources, permits are required for work within the wetland habitat. Department staff submitted permits applications to the US Army Corps of Engineers (Corps), Regional Water Quality Control Board, and the California Department of Fish and Game. Also, the Corps will consult with the US Fish and Wildlife Service due to the presence of the federally endangered tidewater goby.

Project Schedule

The Department worked, or is working, with the Community Development Department to complete the following project tasks:

- CDP application to the Planning Commission
- Development and Review Team (DART) determination of project completeness
- Historic Landmark Commission informational presentation
- Preparation of environmental review documents, including an Initial Study and Draft Mitigated Negative Declaration (IS/DMND)
- Circulation of the IS/DMND beginning September 13, 2011, with public comments due by October 13, 2011.
- Planning Commission October 13, 2011, meeting for comments on the IS/DMND, if requested by the public
- Planning Commission November 17, 2011, meeting for project approval and to adopt the MND
- California Coastal Commission meeting, week of December 5, 2011, for project approval and CDP
- Receipt of federal and state agency permits and incorporation of conditions into Mitigation Monitoring and Reporting Program.

Relevant sheets from the plans are included as an attachment to this report.

Project Construction

Construction is scheduled to begin in January through mid-February 2012, in order to avoid the bird breeding season, pending receipt of all environmental permits. When permitting and funding allows the project to move forward, the parking area and trails adjacent to Highway 101 will be closed to the public for the duration of the vegetation removal, estimated to occur over two weeks. The bike path and lawn area outside of the construction zone will remain open.

Public Outreach

In early August and on September 13, 2011, the Department distributed a notice to over 200 owners, households in the surrounding East Beach neighborhood and interested parties. The purpose of the notice was to inform area residents and owners of the project, pending CDP and the scheduled public hearings. Public outreach will continue as the project progresses.

ATTACHMENTS: 1. Preliminary Design Plans - Project Area
2. Preliminary Design Plans - Culverts

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