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Restoration of Bair Island's wetlands set for final approval

Beth Winegarner, The Examiner

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REDWOOD CITY, Calif. - Starting next year, wildlife officials hope to transform Bair Island into an "island in an urban sea" where locals can escape city life and freeway noise and explore the 1,400-acre area's restored wetlands habitats.

A lengthy public review of the restoration's environmental effects ends today as the California Department of Fish and Game closes the comment period on the plan's final draft. While an initial public review in 2004 yielded many changes, such as shortening the public trail from 2.7 miles to 1.8 miles, increasing the parking lot to allow school buses and allowing on-leash dogs for a trial period, the final plan received primarily congratulations this month, according to refuge Manager Clyde Morris.

Crews could begin to breach outer Bair Island in 2007 to restore the region's natural tidal wetlands, according Morris. Restoration of two sloughs and the addition of wildlife-viewing areas are also in the offing.

"You won't hear the freeway noise anymore," Morris said. "It will be an island of peacefulness and wildlife."

However, funding for the \$6 million to \$10 million restoration plan has not been secured. Aides for Rep. Anna Eshoo, D-Palo Alto, and Democratic Sen. Dianne Feinstein, have closely followed Fish and Game's discussions with the Redwood City Council Bair Island subcommittee, according to Redwood City Vice Mayor Rosanne Foust.

"They're asking for information so they know how to ... get it into the appropriate bills," Foust said.

Much of the work is designed to return Bair Island to its natural state, which in the short term will absorb excess floodwaters and protect nearby neighborhoods, according to John Bradley, deputy project leader with the Don Edwards San Francisco Bay National Wildlife Refuge. It also aims to provide a more native habitat for local species like the clapper rail and the salt marsh harvest mouse — and to regularly flush the area's wetlands with Bay water, diminishing breeding grounds for mosquitoes, Morris said.

In recent months, volunteers have worked to remove non-native cord grass and ice plant while Fish and Game experimented with a plan to shore up sunken sections of the island with silt dredged from the Port of Redwood City. Eventually, all of those sections will be filled with dredged silt, protecting waterbirds from being drawn to the area and then having deadly encounters with aircraft from neighboring San Carlos Airport.

bwinegarner@examiner.com

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