
Posted on Fri, Sep. 22, 2006

Long-sought project to restore Peninsula wetlands about to begin

By Liz Harrelson
MediaNews

A wetlands restoration effort is about to begin on Redwood City's Bair Island, an area environmentalists have fought tooth and nail for decades to preserve.

Revitalization of wetlands used for years to harvest salt for the Leslie Salt Company will start as soon as a bridge is built spanning a high-pressure sewer main, so silt-hauling trucks can access the 30,000-acre Bair Island area divided by sloughs known as the Inner, Middle and Outer isles.

The restoration is good news for two endangered species in the area, said community activist Ralph Nobles.

``We hope it will become healthy wetlands again, and they will be able to take the clapper rail and the salt marsh harvest mouse off the endangered species list, which will make a huge difference," he said.

Overall, the plans are to import 1 million cubic yards of soil dredged from the Port of Redwood City to build up the Inner island's elevation by about two and a half feet.

``We're sort of testing it this year to see if we can successfully bring in upland fill," said Clyde Morris, manager of the Don Edwards San Francisco Bay National Wildlife Refuge.

During this time, public access to the trail looping around the island will be limited to early mornings, late evenings and weekends, said Malcolm Smith, Redwood City public communications manager.

``These closures are necessary for the safety of the public and the crews delivering the dirt fill," Smith said.

If one man is to thank or blame, depending on one's stake in the islands' future it's Nobles.

In 1982, and again in 2004, Nobles and a group of area residents known as the ``Friends of Redwood City" defeated plans by deep-pocketed developers to build on the bay front. More than 25 years ago, the island was owned by Mobil Land Corporation, which proposed building a city similar to Redwood Shores on the land. The plans were approved unanimously by the City Council but ultimately rejected by voters.

After voters closed the doors to development, the island changed hands several times, and in 1997 was sold to the Peninsula Open Space Trust, which in turn donated the land to the Don Edwards San Francisco Bay National Wildlife Refuge. That's when restoration plans began in earnest.

In 2004, another bay-front development known as Marina Shores proposed high-density housing on land adjacent to the island. Again, Nobles and his cohorts opposed the plan, which voters defeated in November 2004.

Today, a toned-down version of the project, dubbed Peninsula Park, is gathering public input, with more positive results.

Long-term restoration plans include the construction of a pedestrian bridge linking Bair Island Road to Inner Bair Island, and two wildlife viewing decks. If all goes well, more dirt will be hauled in and, in 2007, levees surrounding both Outer and Middle Bair Islands will be opened, flooding the grasslands with saltwater, said Morris.

Another fortuitous turn has cut restoration costs by nearly 50 percent. A shift in the construction industry has developers offering to pay the refuge to dump clean dirt on the islands, Morris said Wednesday.

``The original cost was \$22 million in 2003," he said. ``I believe it should cost half of that."

Final cost projections won't be ready until later this year, Morris said.

© 2006 MercuryNews.com and wire service sources. All Rights Reserved.
<http://www.mercurynews.com>