

Trio of hotels set for Buena Vista Lagoon



An architectural rendering of the proposed Inns at Buena Vista Creek. (Courtesy city of Oceanside)



By **Phil Diehl** · Contact Reporter

JUNE 26, 2017, 9:00 AM | OCEANSIDE

Final plans are being ironed out for a trio of Hilton-brand hotels on the upper end of the Buena Vista Lagoon, a reedy freshwater pond at the Oceanside-Carlsbad border that's been the focus of a long-running restoration debate.

Called the Inns of Buena Vista Creek, the hotel project is proposed for 12.5 acres east of Jefferson Street and just south of state Route 78. The vacant land, wedged between the Carlsbad mall and the highway, was created in the early 1970s with sediment dredged from the lagoon.

The business-class properties would be four to six stories tall, with a separate shared events pavilion, a four-story parking structure and other amenities.

Local environmental groups had hoped to preserve the land but lacked the money to purchase it.

“In an ideal world, we would have liked to see that whole parcel acquired for open space,” Diane Nygaard, president of the environmental group Preserve Calavera, said Friday. “But it’s clear that’s not going to happen.”

Instead, they worked for years with the owner — Jenna Development of Signal Hill, near Los Angeles — on an agreement to restore part of the property and the adjacent creek to its natural state.

“They worked very constructively with us for a long time,” said Nygaard, adding that the site was in desperate need of improvement. “This is a terribly degraded piece of land. It’s been a weed patch for years.”

A representative of Jenna Development could not be reached this week to discuss the project.

The Buena Vista Audubon Society, the Buena Vista Lagoon Foundation, the San Luis Rey Band of Mission Indians and other local groups also participated in the effort to minimize the environmental effects of the project..

The land is an environmentally sensitive location along the creek, at the tip of the lagoon and near the lower end of the 134-acre Buena Vista Creek Ecological Reserve that Preserve Calavera worked for years to see created.

“We were concerned because they have this creek reserve on one end and the lagoon reserve on the other end,” said Joan Herskowitz, an Audubon Society board member. “We wanted to make sure that there is a wildlife corridor (between the reserves) that can be traversed by birds and other animals.”

The hotel property may include part of a planned “Waves to Waterfall” trail that eventually would allow pedestrians and cyclists to travel along the creek from the beach to the historic El Salto Falls just east of the Quarry Creek project. Ideally, that trail would link to the Coastal Rail Trail and other regional pathways.

“It will take 20 or 30 years, but the pieces are starting to fall into place,” Nygaard said.



An architectural rendering of the entrance to the Inns of Buena Vista Creek (Courtesy city of Oceanside)

Meanwhile, the lagoon — Southern California’s only freshwater lagoon — has been filling with silt and sediment since the last time it was dredged in 1983. A man-made weir near Coast Highway separates it from the ocean.

A decades-long proposal to restore the lagoon hit some hurdles years ago when state and local groups couldn’t agree on whether it should remain a freshwater lagoon, or go back to its natural state.

Without intervention, the entire 200-acre lagoon will eventually become a marsh or grassy field. At this point, even if a restoration plan moves forward, it’s unclear where the money would come from.

Final environmental documents for the hotel project could go to Oceanside officials for approval before the end of this year, City Planner Jeff Hunt said Wednesday. But numerous other agencies, including Carlsbad, will still need to OK all or parts of the plans.

“It’s still got a lot of the process to go through,” Hunt said.

In 2011, a consultant representing the property owners said they hoped to break ground on the project within a year. However, like any coastal development, the planning hasn’t been easy.

“It’s safe to say there are some citizen concerns,” Hunt said.

Those concerns include how the hotels would affect public views, traffic and wildlife. Final environmental documents addressing those issues and others are expected to be presented

to the Oceanside City Council by the end of this year.

Most of the site is in Oceanside, making that city the lead agency on the project. A little more than two acres is in Carlsbad, though most of that land is to be left as open space.

The project also will need approvals from the California Coastal Commission, the state Department of Fish and Wildlife, and other agencies, Hunt said.

A project description filed with the Oceanside Planning Department in October said the project will include a three-lane bridge across the creek to connect the complex with the adjacent Shoppes at Carlsbad mall. The hotels also will have direct access to Jefferson Street.

Preliminary plans submitted to the city show the westernmost hotel, the tallest, would be a Hampton Inn, the second would be an Embassy Suites, and the third would be a Homewood Suites, all brands in the Hilton chain.