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## Restoring Aliso Creek and Estuary

By Tom Osborne

Having attended recent local government meetings in and beyond Laguna Beach on proposals that would impact the Aliso Creek watershed, members of the SLCA Board see much that we like about Laguna Ocean Foundation’s plan to restore the estuary that once graced the area near the mouth of the creek.



On the other hand, we are alarmed about much of what the Army Corps of Engineers propose in the Aliso Creek Mainstem Ecosystem Restoration Study.

Regarding the estuary plan, recently several Board members attended a Thursday evening meeting at The Ranch at Laguna Beach, organized by our conservation-minded Laguna Ocean Foundation. Emcee Ed Almanza, a member of that organization’s Board of Directors, opened the program by identifying the impressive group of scientists whose research on this project has brought in funding from the California Coastal Conservancy. Then came endorsements from Orange County Fifth District Supervisor Lisa Bartlett (Republican), 36th District Sacramento senator Pat Bates (Republican), and the Laguna Beach City Council. Almanza and project hydrologist Nick Garrity skillfully fielded questions from the audience of nearly fifty engaged citizens.

A PowerPoint presentation outlined the physical features of the 35-mile Aliso Creek watershed, its boundaries, riparian and animal habitat, historical Native American legacy, and post-WWII housing development that polluted its waters and replaced most of the estuary with grass and a parking lot. The capstone of the visuals on the screen was the overlays showing the spatial reach and character of the envisioned restored estuary.

The plan sounds promising. Habitat and wildlife will be restored; the Bluebelt and Greenbelt will be linked; the public will have access to a scenic area; and South Laguna will have a stunning environmental gateway. The overflow parking lot on the inland side of Coast Highway would be replaced (and possibly moved to the north side of the creek) by an estuary. Visiting school children would receive a first-class education on estuarine functioning and restoration. If the public doesn’t understand the dynamics of



A bucolic postcard scene of Aliso Creek circa 1920s



Restoration concept plan - October 2017

coastal ecology, what chance is there that any wetlands will remain given the encroachments of development and climate change-induced sea-rise. (Indeed, we were told that from 1850 to today California’s wetlands have dwindled from some 300 to about 100.) An interpretive center would be built on the north side of the creek. There, visitors would learn about the geology and hydrology of the estuarine area and its hinterland, as well as become acquainted with the culture of the Acjachemen Nation people who occupied the area during the arrival of the Spaniards in the late 1700s.

*continues on page 4*

**Banner photo:** The Garden Band’s rhythms bring the spirit of the season.



# Fears about Taking the Plunge

By Irene Bowie

South Laguna Civic Association has a number of concerns about a proposed pool complex and parking deck at Lang Park. Let me explain.



South Laguna lost its neighborhood school – Aliso Elementary – in the 1980s. As recompense for this loss our community was given a neighborhood park but current high demand for use of Laguna Beach’s community pool, on Park Avenue across from Laguna Beach High School, now has the city eyeing Lang Park (21540 Wesley Drive) as a possible site for two more pools. A conceptual drawing of the new pools, recommended by the City’s recreation committee, was approved by City Council along with funds for the drawing at Council’s mid-year budget meeting.

Laguna’s Public Works Department hired a consultant, Griffith Structures, to do a construction feasibility study for \$80,000. The study will include cost estimates and soil samples; Griffith Structures is currently conducting site work at the location to prepare geotechnical information. Once completed, Public Works will present the feasibility study to City Council. A first draft came in in October 2017; the City is awaiting the final draft.

The larger of the proposed pools would measure 33 meters (36.089 yards) by 25 yards with 12 swimming lanes; the plan also includes a teaching pool measuring 7 yards by 25 yards with three shallow lanes. Also included in the plan is a parking deck with 100

spaces, elevated from the slope with locker rooms, a bathroom, offices, and storage underneath the deck. Senior Recreation Supervisor Adam Gufaroti noted that accommodations would be made for public seating, perhaps temporary bleachers, or permanent structures would be installed. The City says the proposed pool complex would not encroach on the park’s existing community center, playground or tennis and basketball courts but there would be a loss of the grassy field currently used by K-league soccer and T-ball teams among others.

Preliminary costs put the project at approximately \$15 million but costs could go lower or higher depending on the feasibility study and a confirmed design.

Lang Park was selected from several possible sites because of its accessibility, including proximity to public transit stops. The City stresses that this exploration is “very preliminary” and would be explained through “extensive” public outreach if it proceeds forward. Yet we wonder what other sites were considered and how this project could get to the point of expenditures for geologic work and preliminary design with no outreach to determine whether the idea has community support.

South Laguna Civic Association will follow this proposal through the planning process and keep South Laguna residents informed. We hope to hear from our members (info@southlaguna.org) on whether they support such a project.

## Lang Park – current aerial view



Current aerial view of Lang Park showing grass multi-use area (Google Maps)

## Lang Park – proposed swim stadium concept



Swim stadium concept plan shows complete loss of large grassy play field replaced by a parking lot, pools, decks, bleachers and supporting structures. Note ‘Existing Park’ is diminished, reducing the small play spaces for youngsters from 3 to 2, and leaving the tennis court and basketball half court.



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# Make friends, and make music

By Ann Christoph

Come celebrate the season at the Garden Park Holiday Sing-along on **Sunday, December 10 from 2:00 to 4:00 p.m.** The Garden Band will provide musical leadership and song books. Bring your treats and snacks to share. To really get in the holiday spirit, we will be decorating the week before, Sunday, December 3 starting at 10 a.m. Please join us for either or both of these heartwarming events.



The stage was ready for the Harvest Festival on October 22 where we honored our local firefighters. Carly Sciacca and her daughter Alani presented her fire truck watercolor to local firefighters Engineer Bryan Sarjeant and Captain Thomas Padden.



The garden now has a new stage thanks to Tom Joliet. Here Myron Wacholder, Tom, Ken Hughes and Steve O’Connor are attaching the new redwood layer over and beyond the old stage. Thanks to Ganahl Lumber for generously reducing the cost of the materials. South Coast Water District contributed the beautiful boulders that came from the tunnel project.

At lower left, singers gathered around the lively band at last year’s sing-along. Below, Harvest Festival goers enjoyed the now six-piece Garden Band.







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## INSIDE:

- Aliso Creek restoration
- Water Polo stadium at Lang Park
- Garden Park festivities

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*Annual dues are due - see page 3*

## Aliso Creek estuary

*Continued from page 1*

As carefully, even brilliantly, as the restoration plan was conceived and presented, some tough questions were asked from the audience. For example, if aquatic life is to be brought back to an expanded basin at and near the mouth of Aliso Creek, how will such creatures like tidewater goby survive given the toxic urban runoff flowing downstream from inland cities? We were told agreements will have to be reached with the upstream municipalities. This will not be easy but must be done, regardless of this project, if Laguna Beach has any hope of cleaning up the ocean's unhealthy receiving waters at Aliso Beach. Also, the question arose about how the estuary restoration endeavor would be affected by the Aliso Creek Mainstem Ecosystem Restoration Feasibility Study, a new iteration of the old SUPER Project consisting of drop-dams and concretized, channelizing structures now imaginatively rebranded "pools and riffles." Again, the presenters, having no crystal ball, had little in the way of an answer at this time.

I'm confident LOF has the expertise, vision, and drive to figure out answers to these and additional questions that will arise as the project moves forward. Officials from both parties support a restored estuary. Leading state and local officials as well as a major state agency are enthusiastically behind it. As our 5th District Supervisor Lisa Bartlett declared with reference to this project: "We can heal the environment out there."



*Aliso Creek early 1900s (Pulley collection)*

On the other hand, healing the environment seems to have been only a gloss given to the Aliso Creek Mainstem Ecosystem Restoration proposal. While the Army Corps of Engineers claim restoration of Aliso Creek habitat is their main goal, the huge amount of concrete that would be used to further channelize a five-mile segment of the creek bed shows that this is really a flood control project intended to stabilize an old, problematic sewer pipe. Now that so much of the invasive *Arundo* grass has been removed, native riparian habitat seems to be coming back. In other words nature is restoring itself and, perhaps, should be undisturbed by a major infusion of military engineering. Also, some on our Board are concerned that the federal plan shows little evidence of awareness that the Aliso Creek watershed is one unified whole and that whatever is done to a large segment of that area will have major impacts on the entire ecological system. So far, proponents of that plan have told us precious little about these impacts.

SLCA is preparing comments on the Army Corps' plan. Please send your thoughts to SLCA via email: [info@southlaguna.org](mailto:info@southlaguna.org).