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Airport beautification project uprooted

By Ian Gregor

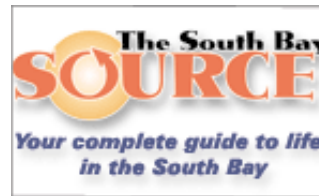
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LAX must rip out 90 palm trees that were planted more than two years ago as part of an \$841,000 beautification project on airport property along Waterview Street in Playa del Rey, the California Coastal Commission has ruled.

The Coastal Commission unanimously agreed with two environmentalists who claimed that the Mexican fan palms were non-native vegetation that could harm sensitive plants and insects in the adjacent dunes area, which is a federally designated recovery area for the endangered El Segundo blue butterfly. Los Angeles International Airport has 90 days to get rid of the trees, the commission decided during a hearing last week in Santa Barbara.

At the same time, the commission allowed the stalled 2.4-acre landscaping project to proceed, as long as airport officials meet certain conditions that include providing the panel with its proposed planting list.

The delays and controversy could have been avoided if the airport had obtained a required permit from the Coastal Commission before starting the project, said conservationist Travis Longcore, who led the charge against the trees along with attorney Catherine Rich.



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“Instead of it being an exotic landscaping project, we’ll have a dune restoration,” said an elated Longcore, a biogeography lecturer at UCLA and a research assistant professor in the sustainable cities program at USC. “We’re very pleased and, ultimately, I think the community will be pleased.”

LAX officials agreed to the permit conditions and in fact asked for permission to remove the trees, said Roger Johnson, the airport’s deputy executive director for environmental affairs.

“I and the rest of the airport understand the stewardship responsibility that LAX has over the dunes system,” said Johnson, who was not working for the airport when the Waterview project began.

Neighbors respond

Reaction to the news was mixed among residents of the Playa del Rey neighborhood immediately north of the project.

Joe McFadden, who has lived on Waterview for 30 years, said the trees enhanced a strip of land that previously was nothing more than a repository for weeds and trash.

“This (decision) seems so petty,” said McFadden, whose living room offers a spectacular view of the ocean but not of the palm trees. “I bet 97 percent of the people wanted (the trees.)”

But his neighbor, 27-year Waterview resident Barbara Griffin, was incensed that more than a dozen of the trees blocked her ocean view. And Trask Avenue resident Mandie Saner said the decision sets a precedent for restoring the entire 100-acre butterfly recovery area.

“The other important thing is people will actually be able to see the plants — the other areas (of the dunes) are closed off to the public,” said Saner, who spoke at the Coastal Commission hearing.

Lengthy ordeal

The Coastal Commission’s decision marks the beginning of the end of a 28-month saga that became an embarrassment to airport officials, who undertook the project after Playa del Rey homeowners pleaded with them — starting in



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1997 — to beautify the 30-foot wide strip of land that winds along Waterview and Napoleon streets and Rindge Avenue from Pershing Drive to Vista del Mar.

With residents' input, the airport decided to plant the palm trees and other vegetation, and install a meandering walking path and an irrigation system. A contractor planted the trees and laid the bed for the path before the project attracted the attention of The Urban Wildlands Group, a small local environmental organization run by Longcore and Rich.

Longcore and Rich argued that the palms and other plants that the airport wanted to sink into the ground could destroy native dunes vegetation such as the El Segundo dunes spineflower. And the irrigation system, they said, could kill off indigenous insects such as the El Segundo Jerusalem cricket by attracting aggressive insects.

Work stoppage

Longcore and Rich stopped the work by pointing out that LAX officials had failed to obtain a Coastal Commission permit for the project. The airport also needed approval of the Los Angeles Public Works Department for portions of the project.

The department last April ruled that the palm trees could stay but that the rest of the plants would have to be native to Southern California dunes environments. So The Urban Wildlands Group — along with the Endangered Habitats League, the Lepidoptera Research Foundation, the Santa Monica Bay Audubon Society, the Sierra Club Airport Marina Group and Playa del Rey residents Saner and Bonnie Foster — focused their attention on the Coastal Commission.

The commission on Wednesday decided that the trees must go, although the walkway can stay. In addition to providing the commission with a planting list, LAX must turn in an irrigation plan and agree to turn off the system once the native vegetation it installs takes hold, Johnson said.

Also, the airport must provide a plan showing the kind of fencing it will install around the dunes area and must submit a monitoring report five years after the project is completed, he said.

The palm trees, which are wilting because LAX has been unable to water them, will be transplanted to other portions of airport property, mostly in the Central Terminal Area, Johnson said. Moving the trees will only slightly inflate the project's original price tag, he said.

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