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LAX gets OK for palm pullout

A botched project on the airport's northwest edge will become a landscaped path, minus nonnative trees.

By Ian Gregor  
Daily Breeze

Following years of mistakes, delays and confusion, LAX directors have received the state's blessing to complete a controversial landscaping project on the airport's northwest perimeter -- an endeavor that will include ripping out 90 illegally planted palm trees.

Although work should begin by mid-April, the palms will remain in place for several more months because the airport must hire a contractor to remove them and re-plant them in the Central Terminal Area, officials said last week.

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The delays in pulling out the palms and completing the other improvements incensed some nearby residents, who complained that the trees blocked their ocean views and that the half-finished project rendered the site ugly.

"Amazing, amazing," Barbara Griffin, a 29-year resident of Waterview Street, said when told of the California Coastal Commission's decision to allow the project to proceed.

"I really didn't expect it to be ever finished. I really didn't. It is to me a surprise and a pleasant surprise, a very pleasant surprise."

Travis Longcore, a director of the environmental group that first raised concerns about the project, said he's delighted with the news but, given the monstrous delays that have occurred, not convinced that the airport will quickly complete the work. He also said he'll monitor the progress to ensure compliance with the commission's specifications.

"We want to see it done right, they said they'll do it right, I'll swing by and have a look," said Longcore, science director of The Urban Wildlands Group and a research professor of geography at USC.

The Coastal Commission's decision appears to signal the end of a five-year odyssey that began with Los Angeles World Airports' attempt to please local residents but unraveled because airport officials failed to follow required procedures. The changes likely will add \$200,000 to \$300,000 to the project's initial \$841,000 price tag, officials said.

The project, which began in 1999, included the towering Mexican fan palms, an irrigation system, new decorative fencing, a walking path and new vegetation. The airport undertook it after Playa del Rey homeowners pleaded with officials 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.

But officials failed to get a required Coastal Development Permit for the project from the Coastal Commission -- a mistake quickly caught by The Urban Wildlands Group, a local environmental organization that had warned airport representatives before the project began that the venture would run afoul of state regulations.

The commission in April 2002 agreed with the group's claim that the palms were nonnative 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. The airport set out to develop a new landscaping plan, but delays ensued because the agency submitted a flawed proposal and the understaffed Coastal Commission took a long time to review it.

Today, 1- to 3-foot weeds sprout from the dirt on either side of the unfinished walking path and dead fronds hang like grayish-brown beards from the tall palms. That will soon begin to change; the airport department has begun notifying residents that it has received final approval from the Coastal Commission to complete the project.

"They should see somebody out there doing something by mid-April, certainly by the end of April," LAX spokeswoman Nancy Castles said in an interview.

Work will be done under a meticulously detailed, 50-page grading and planting plan that specifies where nonnative vegetation can be removed by machine and where it must be done by hand.

One area off Waterview, which has a high concentration of native lupine, will be fenced off to make sure that workers don't harm it, Castles said.

Instead of the decorative, wrought-iron fencing that the airport initially intended to install, the area will be bordered by vinyl-clad chain link -- minus the barbed wire that sits atop the existing fencing. Stations will provide bags that people can use to collect deposits that their dogs leave along the path.

Final restoration work can't begin until the trees are plucked from the ground by large cranes, Castles said. That will have to be done by a private contractor, and the mandatory bid process that the airport must go through will take perhaps four months, she said.

"Our feeling is when this project is completed it's going to be a very nice aesthetic walkway," Castles said.

"It's going to be a very pleasing walk."

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