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Friends of Ballona Wetlands highlights work in community to Marina Affairs Committee

BY HELGA GENDELL

The Marina Affairs Committee received an overview of the Friends of Ballona Wetlands environmental organization at its Wednesday, Aug. 18 meeting at the Marina del Rey Hotel.

Lisa Fimiani, co-executive director of Friends of Ballona Wetlands who has been involved for over 20 years, explained how they are a small non-profit that has worked in the Ballona Wetlands for over 32 years.

The Friends' mission is to champion the restoration protection of the Ballona Wetlands and educate the public as stewards and advocates.

"Friends filed the first lawsuit to save the wetlands in 1984 and that was perhaps the only litigious thing we did," Fimiani told the committee. "We eventually negotiated a successful end to the suit, saving 340 acres of salt marsh, upland and dunes, and began restoration of the saltwater marsh.

"We also worked with other groups to restore tidal flow. The existing Ballona Wetlands was horribly degraded because of a lack of salt water coming in and we had the two tide gates repaired and replaced."

Fimiani said that in 2003 after just 10 years in the making, Friends partnered with Playa Vista and joined in its effort to reconstruct a freshwater marsh.

One of the other things that Playa Vista was mandated to do was to build a riparian corridor, which was constructed along the Loyola Marymount University bluffs and was once known as the "Centinela Ditch," she said.

"This spring the Ballona Freshwater Marsh and the riparian corridor actually made history with baby least Bell's vireos, an endangered bird species. We were so excited to hear about not one, but two pairs that were breeding (at the site)," she said.

"In 2003 we collaborated with the state and the trust for public land and other environmental groups to purchase more wetlands for a total of 600 acres saved. That wouldn't have happened without the developer, Playa Vista, being willing to sit at the table and sell two-thirds of the land that they had bought from Howard Hughes," Fimiani said.

In 2004 the Friends worked with the state's Coastal Conservancy and the Department of Fish and Game to become the designated stewards of the wetlands, and in 2005, the Friends and others won an official ecological reserve designation for the Ballona Wetlands, she noted.

"If you're interested in what's going to happen to the remaining 600 acres of the saltwater marsh, you can get involved with the Ballona Wetlands Restoration Project, and they are looking for volunteers, so if you want to get out and take a walk in the Marina, we are going to need monitoring all over the place," Fimiani told the audience.

"We will be very actively involved in the state's restoration plans for Ballona. The main thing Friends are known for is our successful dunes restoration," she said.

Friends has some volunteers in the dunes area clearing the way for native habitat, and the volunteers learn how to partner with others in huge groups.

"Within the past 20 years, we've had over 65,000 volunteers come to help us restore this precious coastal ecosystem," she said. "We've had measurable results. From 2000 to 2007 the Friends' volunteers removed an estimated 6,500 cubic yards of invasive plants and garbage, equaling more than 450 tons."

Showing a photograph of the dunes, she explained that there were only eight acres in 1995, and a lot of dried native grasses and Hottentot or ice plant. In just 10 years, it's been restored to a dune habitat, with native silver dune lupin blooming, she said.

"Once you restore the habitat, nature comes back. We now have butterflies, native snakes, rabbits, things that once used to thrive in the wetlands," Fimiani said.

"We're also known for our tours and our education programs. They include students of every age from schools and community groups

all around Los Angeles. Some are experiencing nature for the very first time.”

Students from local schools and universities like Santa Monica College, USC, UCLA and LMU do special research projects to study the conditions of the wetlands and to map vegetation and habitat.

“What we offer to people is stewardship and service learning through hands-on restoration. They get their hands in the dirt and they actually learn about and feel what an invasive plant feels like. It becomes an integrative and empowering experience for young children and adults alike,” she said.

“Another exciting thing that’s happening this year is that Santa Monica Bay Restoration Commission is conducting baseline monitoring of the 600 acres of the Ballona Wetlands. A lot of baby fish are probably the fish that people fish for as the fish get older. Ballona Wetlands serves as an estuary and a nursing ground for fish and fish species.

“In 2010 we will start a new beginning at the construction site at Playa Vista for our new Discovery Park. We have partners and have been working together close to 15 years on this. It’s been a dream of our founder, Ruth Lansford, to create a discovery center to begin at the trail head of the Ballona Wetlands and lead people into the freshwater marsh and the saltwater marsh,” she continued.

“Our partners, one of whom is here today, Marc Huffman of Playa Vista; also include Jim Landry from LMU, Edith Read from the Freshwater Marsh, and a newcomer, Eric Strauss, from the Urban Ecology Institute, of whom you’ll hear a lot about in the news in the next few years.”

The Ballona Discovery Center site will be on Bluff Creek Drive off Lincoln Boulevard.

Fimiani said she wanted to share her own experience about working with Playa Vista.

“In the very beginning when we started partnering with Playa Vista, I was asked to become a docent at the Freshwater Marsh. I had been a member of the Friends for 20 years. I’d recently joined the board, and I have to be honest with you, I thought, I don’t want to get involved with the big, bad developer.”

“That was my impression of Playa Vista at that time. And I have changed my opinion 360 degrees. They are the model for developers going forward. And the Freshwater Marsh is perhaps one of the most successful reconstructed marshes in the country,” she said.

“It was Playa Vista and people like (Marc) Huffman who said, Okay, what can we find in common to make happen for these wetlands.’ I have to say that they walk the walk and talk the talk. They do what they say they’re going to do. We have one of the most beautiful freshwater marshes in the country,” Fimiani said.

“Discovery Park consists of 1.7 acres. Out of respect for Native American Indians, when they (Playa Vista) came across bones, they reinterred them with great reverence and they will be part of our Discovery Park. We hope to open some time later this year. We now have an opportunity to make history in this partnership with Playa Vista and LMU.

“We will have an amphitheater and we applied for a huge grant from the state to construct a \$3 million, state-of-the art building that will be the focal point for people at the Ballona Wetlands to come and learn about the wetlands, and from here, go out into the wetlands,” she continued.

“If you didn’t know, Marina del Rey and the Ballona Wetlands are neighbors, and we’re not only neighbors, per the map of the Ballona Wetlands in 1923, there is an imprint of the Marina. What people don’t realize is that Marina del Rey is part of the Ballona Wetlands, not the other way around.”

Fimiani said that when she has served as treasurer of the Los Angeles Audubon Society, what she’s witnessed in the Marina is that most of the businesses are a “little nervous” about the bird population.

“There is a way to embrace them and actually make them part of your environment,” she said.

“I predict that if Marina del Rey starts embracing the bird population in and around your area, you’re going to see a huge turnaround in tourism and visitors.

“In Marina del Rey on Venice Beach, you have a very well-known (in bird circles) least tern nesting colony. We bring a lot of kids out to help us in the restoration of this enclosed dune habitat. We also partner with Los Angeles Audubon and Santa Monica Bay Audubon societies.

“The kids are just stunned that there is something like this right in Los Angeles. As an Audubon person, I’ve worked with the neighbors who say they don’t want the birds or the fence, but when you understand that these birds were hard-wired genetically to come back to this beach, that’s all they know. They don’t know that there’s been a marina built here.

“I’d like to invite all of you to fly on over to the creek’ and take a tour of the Ballona Wetlands. We’ll get your hands dirty during one of our restoration parties. There’s so much to see and do over there.

“We’d like to embrace you as our neighbor. We have Coastal Cleanup Day coming on Sept. 25, and we expect around 250 people at the wetlands. There are all kinds of projects to get involved in,” Fimiani suggested.