

By Donna Littlejohn

DAILY BREEZE

Tired of seeing trash on a 33-acre vacant lot a block away from her house in San Pedro, Cathy Beauregard-Covit decided to take matters into her own hands a few months ago.

She wound up on a personal mission.

As Beauregard-Covit waded through the tall weeds below the bike path near Crescent Avenue at 22nd Street, she sank into a marshy swamp filled with mosquito fish. Before long, she began noticing all the fresh-water birds that populated the southwest corner of the former tank farm property, apparently drawn by the natural water source.

Now the mother of five is on a crusade to preserve and develop the fresh-water marsh with the support of the Coastal San Pedro Neighborhood Council.

“My goal is to make this an educational resource for everyone,” said Beauregard-Covit, a neighborhood council board member. “It doesn't need to be man-made — it's already nature-made.”

But the small marsh sits on a port-owned parcel that is destined to be the focus of debate as port and city officials begin to address waterfront redevelopment.

“That whole area is still currently subject to a comprehensive planning effort, so it's premature to at this point,” said port spokeswoman Theresa Adams Lopez, summing up an April 25 letter the port sent to Beauregard-Covit in response to her request that she be granted guardianship of the property. “But we appreciate her offer.”

The port, Lopez said, has committed to keeping the area free of trash in the meantime. But eventually, she said, planners will be looking at the entire property for redevelopment and won't commit to supporting any specific use until then.

Larry Fukuhara, program director for the Cabrillo Marine Aquarium, said the area reminds him of a vacant lot he often explored while growing up in Long Beach.

“There was an area called Billy Goat Hill by the railroad tracks,” Fukuhara said. “It was kind of cool. It's not a big thing, but the neighborhood kids don't have places like this anymore. There's too much TV and too much concrete.”

Beyond the sheer fun and homespun adventure of it, Fukuhara said observing local wildlife can be a significant influence in children's lives.

Carefree afternoons at Billy Goat Hill, he said, helped determine his decision to major in biology in college.

Fukuhara estimates the pond to be about 20 feet long, with the water coming from an underground fresh-water source.

The mosquito fish, available through the county to help control mosquito populations, were likely put there by someone over the years, he said. Among the birds that frequent the property are red winged blackbirds, not often seen in the area, he said.

'Some nice open space'

The Coastal San Pedro Neighborhood Council wants to apply for city funding to help maintain and nurture the area, said council President Doug Epperhart. "I think it's good if we could get some nice open space for the neighborhood," he said.

But the grassy property, vacated 10 years ago when the Unocal tank farm moved, will likely become one of the most hotly contested pieces of the waterfront redevelopment puzzle.

Suggestions for the land already run the gamut, including sports fields, a man-made saltwater marsh, and a mixed-use development with condominiums, entertainment venues and retail shops.

Beauregard-Covit, who is organizing a cleanup of the property from 9 a.m. to noon Saturday, says there's room for a new development alongside the fresh-water bog, which she estimates is located on less than a quarter of the entire property.

"I really believe we can share the use," she said. "It's not that big. . . . We can keep what's here and work with whatever else is planned."

A different proposal

Her proposal, which includes planting colorful wildflowers along the slope between the pond and bike path, is different from an earlier one for a man-made salt water marsh that would take up the entire property.

"I've had an unbelievably warm response," she said of her plan, which she will take to the Port Community Advisory Committee in the future. "We have everyone from neighborhood kids to the elderly who want to come down and help." And while planners debate what to do with the property, it provides a resource for neighborhood children, Epperhart said.

“Instead of waiting five years to go through the (planning) process, it would be really neat if we could clean it up and make it accessible,” he said.

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