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Rough-Hewn Wilmington Ready for Extreme Makeover

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Upstaged by its upscale neighbors and dwarfed by the massive Los Angeles and Long Beach port complex, the seaside community of Wilmington is blue-collar, likes beer more than wine and has a bit of a chip on its shoulder.

Shipping containers and the port's giant cranes block the path to the shore, and there is no beach, unlike nearby Manhattan Beach and Redondo Beach. Unlike Palos Verdes, there are no million-dollar hillside homes. And unlike its closest neighbor, San Pedro, Wilmington has never seen a full-scale effort to revitalize its waterfront.

Until now.

The Board of Harbor Commissioners this month signed off on a contract with Watertown, Mass.-based architecture and design firm Sasaki Associates Inc. to draft a plan for parks, retail, walkways and transportation at an L-shaped, 90-acre swath of land once tagged for port expansion. Still years from completion, the \$120 million project's caper is an oceanfront plaza at the spruced-up site of the Banning's Landing Community Center.

The waterfront development is principally the result of a decades-long push by community activists to beautify Wilmington, long considered the poor stepsister of San Pedro. While the largely Latino population of the combined Wilmington/Harbor City area, at about 80,000, is roughly the same as San Pedro's, Wilmington has far fewer cultural and recreational facilities.

"We fought and fought until they finally listened to us. It has been a hard struggle," said Lucy Mejia, a member of the Wilmington Neighborhood Council board. "We want open space for kids to play."

Meanwhile, a \$700 million transformation of 400 acres in an eight-mile stretch of the San Pedro port area, called Bridge to Breakwater, is one of the state's largest planning projects; a one-mile stretch has already been completed. The Harbor Boulevard Parkway, a cruise ship promenade and the Red Car trolleys are already up and running.

The Port of Los Angeles emphasizes the connections between the San Pedro and Wilmington area developments. "The Wilmington side is coming along a bit more slowly than the San Pedro side," said Theresa Adams Lopez, a spokeswoman for the port. "We are considering it all one waterfront, an L.A. waterfront."

Regardless, many residents of Wilmington see the waterfront rehab as the start of a better age. They are optimistic it will make more businesses take a closer look at the possibility of setting up shop in the area.

"This can hopefully become an attraction for people all over the city and the region," said Ken Melendez, chair of the Wilmington Waterfront Development Subcommittee. "For this community, it would mean that we are not treated like a Third World country."

The project still faces hurdles. The local business community, guided by port interests, has been at best lukewarm about the project and is concerned that certain elements will hurt the economy by hindering port operations. Most notably, two Department of Water and Power tankers, leased by Valero Energy Corp., must be removed to make way for the project.

Dan Hoffman, director of the Wilmington Chamber of Commerce, said the chamber has been taking a "wait-and-see" approach to the waterfront development. "I know that there is huge support within the community for the project. The sense that I get is that we want there to be a balance, that nothing is kind of black of white," he said.

Dirty Wall

Back in 2001, Wilmington activists found one thing black and white: their opposition to the proposed 1.6-mile, 20-foot wall to run along C Street, one of the city's main arteries. The wall, intended to lessen noise problems, would separate the community from the port.

"I called it the dirty wall," said Skip Baldwin, a leader of the Wilmington Citizens Committee. "We were complaining so loudly that all the people who were running for mayor four years ago, they all heard about it. All these people said there will be no wall built there."

The wall wasn't only about noise abatement: it also delineated the area into which the port could continue to expand. The port had swallowed up adjacent land and container terminal operator TraPac Inc., which declined comment for this article, sought to move into land abutting its current facility.

Buoyed by a court decision that prevented China Ocean Shipping Co. from constructing a container complex at the port, the activists began to believe that not only could they stop the wall, they could win a fight to use the land for the community. So, Mejia and Baldwin suggested the area be turned into a park, dubbed POLA for Port of Los Angeles.

At the same time, Jesse Marquez, founder of the Wilmington Coalition for a Safe Environment, developed his own plans. More elaborate than the park plan, Marquez's vision included a soccer field, stadium, manmade lake, museum, shops and a new fire station, among other things.

In 2003, the San Francisco-based firm SMWM was brought in to put the ideas on paper. Before that, awash in suggestions, Melendez said there was no clear direction and the project was in danger of getting swamped.

"We were not going to keep throwing different (stuff) and get nothing. We all had great ideas, but could they be achieved?" he said. Behind closed doors, Melendez said the various parties agreed it would be best to settle on one practical plan.

That plan became the preferred alternative outlined in the conceptual framework drafted by SMWM. Under this plan, there is no port expansion toward C Street, and there is a buffer zone made up of parks and open space between Harry Bridges Boulevard and C Street to decrease the impact of port activities on Wilmington residents. Other plan components include the development of commercial uses on Avalon Boulevard, another buffer replacing a Department of Water and Power tank site, extension of the Red Car line, an overpass between Harry Bridges and the waterfront, and a new plaza to become a focus for retail, community facilities and maritime-related functions.

With the plan articulated, politicians began lining up behind it. Rep. Jane Harman, D-El Segundo, came out in support, and Los Angeles City Councilwoman Janice Hahn became its champion and shepherded it through the council, which approved the plan in June 2004. Later that year, the Board of Harbor Commissioners added its approval.

"Building this waterfront is really historic," Hahn said. "I am adamant that we should not move forward with building a waterfront in San Pedro unless we do the same in Wilmington. It is the least that we should do for this community that has been trampled on by industry for far too long."

Ambitious schedule

Sasaki will craft the master plan, detailing the entire development and its environmental effects, as the first buffer-zone stage in 30 acres of the project gets underway. Already, Bayview Field, a park in the buffer zone area, has been dedicated and another park, Triangle Park, is being cleaned up for use within a year.

Owen Lang, a principal with Sasaki, said there's an ambitious schedule for the project, with the buffer to be completed in 2008 and the entire master plan ready by 2009. "It requires everything to be pretty well decided in advance so we can be moving along in a timely manner," he said.

The hardest task will be deciding what to do in the latter stages of the project. Then, disparate community interests will have to come together to decide the mix of commercial and cultural uses along Avalon Boulevard and at the plaza.

For now, Lang said the community is squarely behind the project and anxious to see it gets started. "This is a long time coming, so the sense of urgency is very real," he said. "It has a lot of community momentum, and that has forged a pretty clear mandate."

Businesses already have begun to express interest in the area. Hoffman said that developers and restaurant companies, among others, have approached the chamber asking about opportunities created by the waterfront project.

Steve Notaro, president of Torrance-based Decoma Structural Industries Inc., which is turning an 80,000-square-foot property in Wilmington into artists' lofts, foresees the waterfront project as a spark that can drastically change the community.

"Most people are very negative about Wilmington. Wilmington has a stigma that is worse than anywhere else," said Notaro. "If they do half of what they are planning, it is going to be the best buy in the South Bay."

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