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Port Agrees to Explore Economic Potential of Pond 20

Adjacent to Imperial Beach, Pond 20 could someday be home to a hotel or other businesses as the city, port and San Diego enter negotiations to redevelop the area.

- By Khari Johnson January 13, 2011

As you drive down state Route 75 or Palm Avenue, whichever you prefer to call it, if you look to your right between 13th and 16th Streets, you see an incredible view of the San Diego city skyline. Below it, dirt, a few birds and not much else.

Plans to restore and eventually develop land in the area, known as Pond 20, took new steps forward Tuesday as the San Diego Unified Port District Commission agreed to move forward with an agreement, or memorandum of understanding (MOU), to take steps in the short and long term to clean up and perhaps develop businesses in the area.

No specific projects have been committed to, but the MOU will start the process of outlining possibilities for use of the land.

Three parties will be involved in negotiations: the Port of San Diego, which controls the area, and the cities of Imperial Beach and San Diego. Pond 20 is in San Diego and also within the Imperial Beach Redevelopment Agency.

Commissioner Lou Smith agreed it's a great idea and wants the port to spend "a few grand" on maintenance crews to make immediate fixes, such as possibly removing the fence.

"I suspect it's at least six months before you [port staff] come up with an agreement and the problem is it looks like crap now," he said.

"I think we've got 10 or 20 grand in our maintenance budget that would improve the appearance of that area enormously. We can't wait 10 years for a planning process or even two years for a planning process. We've got to do something now."

A proposal presented by the South County Economic Development Council (SCEDC) called for, in the short term, public art, a sign showing various species in the habitat and to take down the rusty chain-link fence.

The area is not considered a part of the National Wildlife Refuge being restored by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service. No specifics were offered in the SCEDC proposal about impact to the environmentally sensitive area but will be a factor in the MOU, said port staff.

No specifics were offered as to who would pay for what.

In the long term, proposals include the construction of "a boutique hotel," a place for recreational sports like kayaking and "the creation of a financial formula that will allow this to happen."

Earlier in the meeting, a commissioner called Harbor Drive "San Diego's front porch" before approving redevelopment plans for the downtown street.

"This is our front porch and I'm really disappointed in how it looks," said Mayor Jim Janney.

In his first meeting representing the people of Imperial Beach, Commissioner Dan Malcolm said he has no preconceived notions of "what the ultimate development is going to be."

"The only notion that I have sitting here today is that it's going to involve a lot of public outreach, it's going to include a lot of dialogue of all the stakeholders," which he said includes environmental groups, community planning groups such as the South County Economic Development Council and local residents.

No project should go forward without "extensive public dialogue," he said, for an area that "can really provide a genesis for redevelopment along Palm Avenue."

The negotiated agreement should include specific benchmarks and timelines, he said.

"I mean this really is Imperial Beach's front porch," said Nelson, who often rides his bike in the area.

"If you ride along the road there and you look to your right and you see that chain-link fence that we have there. It's the only chain-link fence around the whole thing, and it looks awful."

Correction: The article first mentioned Commissioner Bob Nelson as requesting immediate changes be made to the area around Pond 20, but these were comments made by Commissioner Lou Smith.

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What would you like to see happen there? Do you think it can help the economy in Imperial Beach? Tell us in the comments.