

MAKING

WAVES

The Surfrider Foundation Newsletter

Vol. 5, No. 2 Spring/Summer 1989



Bolsa Chica musbberger. Video by Ace/Photo by Sharp.

Victory at Bolsa Chica

by Tom Pratte

A landmark agreement has been reached that scraps the proposed marina, the navigable ocean entrance and the mile-long detached breakwater plans at Bolsa Chica. As a result, the surf, the beach and the bikepath will be saved for public use. And, wetland acreage for preservation and restoration has been increased from 915 to 1105 acres. At the same time, Signal Landmark will go forward with a residential development plan which will take place on dry land.

Peter Denniston, President of Signal Landmark, the major property holder at Bolsa Chica, characterized the

agreement as "a win for the community." He commented that developers cannot continue to play by the old rules, that they must be sensitive to the environmental community and the political realities.

The Setting

One of the last major pieces of coastal open space in rapidly urbanizing southern California, Bolsa Chica is home to over 175 species of birds, including five endangered species, and is bounded by a magnificent stretch of beach that draws millions of visitors each year. It is also an extremely

desirable chunk of real estate. Proposed developments over the past 25 years have been a major threat to the continued viability of the beach and wetlands.

Wetland Habitat

The Bolsa Chica (meaning "little pocket") was originally an area of at least 2,000 acres of salt marsh surrounded by freshwater wetlands. Flocks of migratory birds were thick enough to darken the sky at midday. All of the freshwater areas have since

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"Here lies the Single Landshark...Born of Ignorance and Greed...Overcome by Popular Demand." Jim Bevington does the honors. Photo by TP.

Victory at Bolsa Chica *(cont'd from pg.1)*

been converted to agricultural and residential development. Portions of the salt marsh have been filled and developed for residential use, but about 1,300 acres of the historic saltwater wetland remain.

In the 1920's oil was discovered and today much of the wetland is an active oilfield with about 150 functioning wells. The wells are connected by a system of levee roadways whose footprint, together with that of drilling pads and other facilities, occupies several hundred acres. This acreage is historic and restorable (but not currently functioning) wetland. The levee system isolates pockets of wetland that are functioning, but degraded due to lack of tidal access. There are currently many breeding pairs of the endangered Belding's Savannah Sparrow utilizing the degraded portions of the wetlands.

If not for the oil wells, the Bolsa Chica would likely have gone the way of other nearby wetlands that were developed in the 1960's. However, the pumping of a billion barrels of oil has caused the wetland area to sink anywhere from 3 to 5 feet. It can never be restored to its original state.

The Bolsa Chica Coastal Plan

In 1985, the California Coastal Commission conceptually approved a plan by Orange County to develop a marina in the wetland with a navigable

entrance cut through the State Beach. The Commission required restoration of the remaining wetlands as a quid pro quo for development. The Commission also established specific performance standards to avoid or completely mitigate all potentially significant impacts of development. The Commission pledged itself to permit the harbor

development only if it were found to be the least environmentally damaging alternative, and only if it would have no significant adverse impact on the sand supply or recreational values of the beach.

Jockeying For Position

In 1987, Signal Landmark Inc. sponsored the introduction of Senate Bill 1517 in the California Legislature. SB 1517 was intended to establish a special assessment District to fund the development project and marina. Support for the bill from the City of Huntington Beach, which completely surrounds the unincorporated Bolsa Chica area, was politically essential for its passage. If the Harbor District Bill passed, Signal Landmark Inc. (aka the "Single Landshark") would have the political momentum to spearhead the project through to development.

In February 1988 a public hearing on the issue indicated overwhelming opposition to the marina and the wetlands development. The estimated crowd of 500 people was comprised of wetlands advocates and beach users in equal proportions. The generally pro-development City Council of Huntington Beach was impressed with the testimony and the broad cross-section of the community that was represented. The City gracefully declined to support the Harbor District. Following another



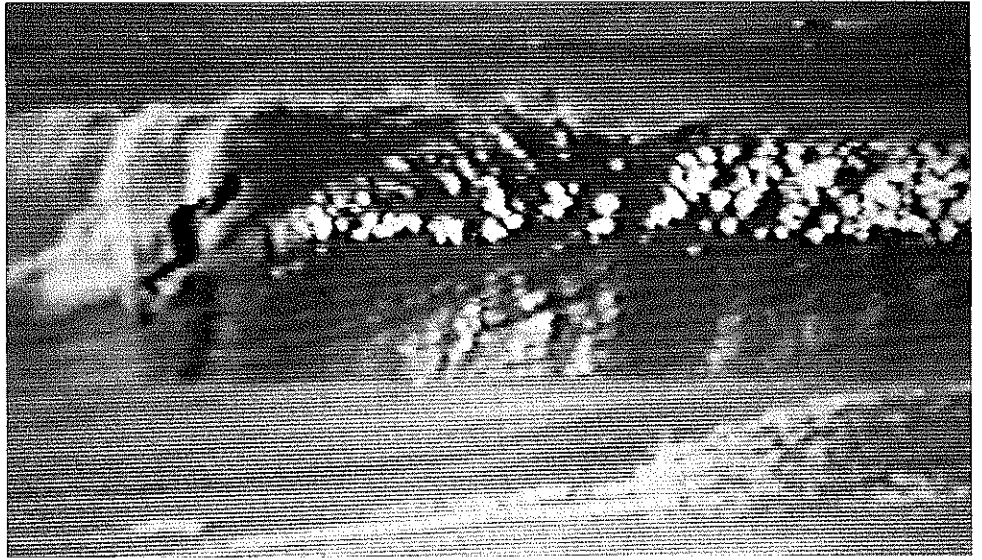
Bolsa Chica public hearing. Video by Tom Van Wie/Photo by Sharp.

controversial meeting in May 1988, the City directed its staff to draw up an alternative plan. In August 1988 the bill was withdrawn.

Undaunted, Signal Landmark kept moving ahead with a million dollar feasibility study for the harbor. The developers remained convinced that the Bolsa Chica Harbor, a project that had been on the drawing boards for 25 years, was still viable. However, when the Army Corps came to town to present preliminary findings that the project could be built, they were met with another wave of public opposition.

In October 1988 the Surfrider Foundation sponsored a rally to Save Bolsa Chica State Beach on the same day as the Amigos de Bolsa Chica's annual 10K run. Together we lined up along a mile of the beach that would be ruined by the harbor project. We paraded a memorial coffin with a shark fin sticking through the top and held a mock-funeral for "the Single Landshark." The tombstone read: "Here lies the Single Landshark...Born of Ignorance and Greed...Overcome by Popular Demand."

In November 1988, the Mayor of Huntington Beach, John Erskine, and the County Supervisor, Harriet Wieder, jointly called for reconsideration of the development plan and created a task force to examine alternatives. Orange County, the City of Huntington Beach, the State Lands Commission, Signal Landmark, and the Amigos de Bolsa Chica were represented on the task



Bolsa Chica. Video by Ace/Photo by Sharp.

force and a professional facilitator was retained to assist the process.

When the City took action to participate in the new planning coalition, the Surfrider Foundation recommended that they enter the negotiations with the expressed intention of examining alternatives without a navigable ocean entrance. The City voted 4-3 in favor of a motion to this effect, thereby eliminating the harbor project from consideration. If the planning coalition could *not* reach an agreement, the old harbor plan would be back on the front burner.

Through six months of negotiations all parties remained at the table and hammered out an agreement. Signal Landmark gave up the harbor

and will still make a healthy profit on housing development. The Amigos gave up a minor area of degraded wetlands to housing development landlocked behind an arterial roadway, and they gained 190 acres of wetlands above what was in the previous plan. It's being said that The Surfrider Foundation is the only party that got everything without giving up anything.

The City of Huntington Beach should be commended for its choice in retaining highly competent consultants for evaluating the Bolsa Chica quagmire. Attorney Katherine Stone and former congressman Jerry Patterson analyzed the fine print in the proposed legislation that would have established the special assessment district. Coastal scientists Robert Wiegel, Douglas Inman, Robert Dean, and Orville Magoon evaluated the impacts the proposed ocean entrance would have on the beaches. Joe Bodovitz, former executive director of the California Coastal Commission, steered the planning coalition through a rigorous examination and resolution of the issues. Finally, the City Administrator Paul Cook played a key role in designing the alternative plan.

The new plan for Bolsa Chica has yet to be brought before the Board of Supervisors for adoption. Many of the land use plan elements are conceptual and will be made more specific before development can proceed — traffic and development density will be at issue. Meanwhile, back at the beach the surf is rolling freely, and the beach is packed with people from all over the L.A. Basin enjoying the great outdoors. We'll settle for that.



Tom Pratte representing the Surfrider Foundation. Video by Tom Van Wie/Photo by Sharp.