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Sand, Native Plants, Experts -- a New Dune Takes Some Doin'

By Sara Lin
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For five families in Newport Beach, dunes day is coming.

The residents are expected to be ordered by the California Coastal Commission to rebuild the rolling sand dunes in front of their oceanfront homes that were flattened late one April night — allegedly to improve ocean views.

It took less than three hours to level the dunes, but experts say rebuilding them could take several years and hundreds of thousands of dollars.

Re-forming the flat swath to mirror the wind-swept mounds still existing on either side will require more than just scooping sand into piles, according to ecologists who have restored dunes in Southern California.

The dunes must be carefully sculpted, and native plant life — such as the purple-flowered sand verbena and yellow-flowered beach evening primrose — must be coaxed back to life.

"You can't just hire gardeners," said Travis Longcore, who teaches a bio-resource management class at UCLA. "There needs to be a plan ... and seeds collected from local sources, like the nearest natural dune."

In addition, experts say, a specialist will have to visit the site regularly for several years to ensure the landscape's recovery.

The destroyed dunes spanned an area about 150 feet long and 30 feet wide. The irregular mounds had stood 3 to 6 feet high, blocking the ocean views from some of the homeowners' ground-level decks.

They disappeared after the owners of five properties on the 7300 block of West Ocean Front Avenue allegedly paid an employee working on the nearby Santa Ana River dredging project \$2,000 to flatten them using heavy equipment, according to Newport Beach police and California Coastal Commission staff investigating the incident.

The residents could not be reached for comment Tuesday and have not yet responded to the commission's accusations.

Rebuilding the dunes will probably require some heavy equipment similar to the machines used to deconstruct the landforms in the first place, Longcore said. Furthermore, he said, residents will probably have to hire a biologist to monitor the site over a period of five years.

The commission will probably issue cease-and-desist and restoration orders against the Newport residents after a public hearing in January.

Sand dunes are a vanishing landform in Southern California. Protected by state law, many dunes support rare ecosystems. The Newport Beach dunes, near the mouth of the Santa Ana River, are particularly important because they are adjacent to one of the few successful breeding colonies of the endangered California least tern, said Aaron McLendon, the commission's statewide enforcement analyst.

Similar dune restoration projects performed by environmental consulting firms have cost in the six-figure range, according to Longcore, the UCLA ecologist. He noted that academic and nonprofit organizations specializing in dune restoration can do the work for less.

Surveying the site Tuesday afternoon, Dick Lovitt, 74, of Fullerton pointed to a long flat strip of bare sand between two small mounds covered with ice plant.

"You can see it was the same as those — with the peaks and recesses," said Lovitt, who had stopped by to see the site after reading news reports. He said he used to rent a cottage nearby.

One of the homes in question had "For Sale" signs on it; a second was swathed in plastic sheeting and scaffolding.

"I see all the 'For Sale' signs," Lovitt said. "I guess they were trying to enhance their views for that purpose. Trouble is, they got bit in the behind."

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