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## Local News

### Panel will rule on dispute over LAX landscaping

By Ian Gregor  
STAFF WRITER

An ongoing skirmish over a 30-foot-wide ribbon of land on the northwest corner of Los Angeles International Airport has pitted neighbor against neighbor, drawn in multiple environmental groups and stalled a major landscaping project.

The controversy is over an LAX project begun over a year ago on the northern boundary of the sand dunes that are home to the endangered El Segundo blue butterfly.

Some nearby residents love the improvements, which included planting 90 fan palm trees, an irrigation system and a walkway along Waterview Street, Rindge Avenue and Napoleon Street between Pershing Drive and Vista del Mar.

Others, however, grouse that the palm trees block their ocean views. And environmentalists say the nonnative palm trees and irrigation system could ravage the delicate dunes habitat.

All made their case in Westchester on Tuesday at a public hearing before two officials from the Department of Public Works Bureau of Engineering. About a dozen Playa del Rey residents and half as many airport officials attended the hearing, which was held to help determine the project's future.

Jean Rezzo said she was willing to tolerate airplane noise for an ocean view but now sees a forest of trees when she gazes out from her home on Waterview Street.

"I didn't buy a house in Twenty-Nine Palms," Rezzo said. "You watch a sailboat go by and all of a sudden it disappears behind a tree."

On the other side is her neighbor, Joe McFadden, who heckled Rezzo and some of the environmentalists as they spoke.

"The trees have added beauty, added to our property values," McFadden said. "I have tangerines and rose bushes in my yard. Should I take them out? They're not native."

Public works officials have recommended that the \$841,000 project go forward provided LAX uses only plant species that are native to Southern California coastal dunes. But they also would allow the



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airport to retain the palm trees — a compromise that dismays environmentalists.

The engineering bureau will issue a decision on the project in a few days, said James Doty, a bureau environmental supervisor who chaired Tuesday's hearing. That decision can be appealed to the Board of Public Works and then to the California Coastal Commission, he said.

Doty said LAX also will have to get a second development permit for the project from the Coastal Commission, although airport environmental manager Steve Crowther questioned whether that's the case.

The controversy over the Waterview project shows that when it comes to LAX and its neighbors, even the best of intentions can explode into fireworks.

LAX undertook the improvements following years of pleas from residents who said the dunes boundary was choked with weeds and scrub brush. Airport contractors planted the palm trees and laid the bed for a meandering walking path, but construction stopped last April after a local environmental organization called The Urban Wildlands Group charged that the airport failed to get a required Coastal Development Permit for the work.

Airport officials said they didn't think they needed such a permit, but the Coastal Commission subsequently told them that they did.

The project is north of the 200-acre El Segundo blue butterfly preserve, and lies in a zone that the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service designates as a recovery area for the insect.

Numerous other plants and insects are found only in the dunes, said Travis Longcore, a biogeographer who is an officer with The Urban Wildlands Group and helped write the butterfly recovery plan.

Longcore said he supports landscaping the area but objects primarily to the palm trees because they would provide perches from which nonnative birds such as starlings could swoop down and attack animals and devour plants that are native to the dunes.

The trees, he argued, are unnecessary to the project's success; native plants are just as attractive.

"I think we need to understand that ecological systems and beauty don't need to be at odds with one another," added Marcia Hanscom, who co-chairs the Sierra Club California's coast and ocean committee.

Some Playa del Rey residents agreed the palm trees need to go — but only those that block views.

A couple of men, however, verbally savaged anyone who even hinted that any palm trees should be yanked out.

McFadden, the Waterview resident, blurted out "Gestapo tactics!" after Longcore began to speak, to which a puzzled Long-core replied, "I'm not sure what this has to do with the Nazis."

Other fans of the palms were somewhat more moderate and avoided allusions to the Third Reich. Tom Hancock, who lives on Whitlock Avenue, said he would personally maintain a portion of the landscaped area if the work is allowed to be completed.

Doty, the engineering bureau's environmental specialist, wondered aloud whether the landscaping improvements could be made now and changed later if the airport decides to expand the restored dunes area, which currently ends four to six city blocks from the project site.

Longcore responded that native plants already grow in the sand

adjacent to the project site, even if the habitat is not officially restored.

LAX officials say they simply want to make nearby residents happy.

“Whatever the decision is, we’ll live with it,” said Crowther, the airport environmental manager. “We thought we were doing something good for the community.”

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