
Solution for palm tree error accepted

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The final credits are about to roll on a 4 1/2-year-long environmental drama that began when Los Angeles International Airport illegally planted 90 Mexican fan palm trees as part of a controversial landscaping project.

The airport and the state have reached a conceptual agreement over removing the trees and restoring the environmentally sensitive area along Waterview Street northeast of the airfield. Delays in getting to this point were due to LAX submitting flawed restoration plans and the California Coastal Commission taking a long time to review them, officials said.

Al Padilla, a Coastal Commission program analyst, said he is awaiting the airport's final restoration plan. He said he believes work could begin in early 2005.

"I think everyone's satisfied with the preliminary design and the protection it will afford," Padilla said. "I suspect by the end of the year (LAX) should have the (work) permit."

The delays frustrated some nearby homeowners, who complain that the tall, skinny palms chop up their panoramic ocean views. Few have been more incensed than 29-year Waterview resident Barbara Griffin.

"No kidding?" Griffin said Friday when told that the trees could be coming out soon. "I hardly know what to say."

Today, the site is shabby and unkempt. Weeds have claimed much of the walking path and dead fronds hang like brown beards below the palms' healthy crowns.

LAX hired a contractor to plant the trees almost five years ago as part of an \$841,000 project that included an irrigation system and a walking path. Airport officials undertook the work after Playa del Rey homeowners pleaded with them to beautify the 30-foot-wide strip of land that winds along Waterview and Napoleon streets and Rindge Avenue from Pershing Drive to Vista del Mar.

But officials failed to get a required Coastal Development Permit for the project from the Coastal Commission -- a mistake quickly seized upon by The Urban Wildlands Group, a local environmental organization. The commission in April 2002 agreed with the group's claim that the palms were nonnative vegetation that could harm sensitive plants and insects in the adjacent dunes area, which is a federally designated recovery area for the endangered El Segundo blue butterfly.

The commission, however, agreed to issue LAX a retroactive Coastal Development Permit to landscape the site providing the airport removed the trees and restored native vegetation.

The commission also agreed that the airport wouldn't have to tear out the trees until the agency signs off on its amended landscaping, watering and fencing plans.

LAX first submitted new landscaping plans to the commission about 13 months ago, but they were immediately challenged by The Urban Wildlands Group.

The commission instructed the airport to submit better plans, which it did in August, said Barbara Yamamoto, LAX's community relations director.

Padilla's concerns with the latest plans focused on where and how the airport wanted to grade the land, Yamamoto said. Padilla and representatives from the airport and The Urban Wildlands Group walked the area together recently and agreed on a plan acceptable to everyone.

"This last meeting, it was like, please guys, let's expedite, let's not lose another year," said Travis Longcore, The Urban Wildlands Group's science director and a research professor of geography at USC.

The airport's plans for the site still include a crushed granite walking path and vinyl-coated chain-link fencing, which would replace the new, black wrought-iron fence that some neighbors apparently found offensive.

The palms will be replanted elsewhere on airport property.

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