



Fighting for the Future

By Jodi Helmer, Urban Farm Contributor | August 23, 2011

COMMUNITY INPUT PROMPTS ECO-FRIENDLY SOLUTION TO POLLUTION, NOISE PROBLEMS.



PHOTO COURTESY SASAKI ASSOCIATES

Aerial view of Wilmington Waterfront Park reconnecting the community and the waterfront.

Residents of Wilmington, Calif., were outraged to learn that the Port of Los Angeles planned to build a 16-foot high barrier along a 1-mile stretch between the riverfront and their neighborhood.

The wall was proposed as a noise buffer to help minimize the sound of noise, air pollution and the sight of cargo containers and cranes at the Port of Los Angeles, the largest seaport in the nation. Residents of Wilmington neighborhood agreed that something needed to be done but argued that a concrete wall was not the solution.

“Residents were very concerned, and rightly so, about what the impact on the community was going to be,” explains Melissa McCann, ASLA, senior associate for integrated planning and design firm, Sasaki Associates Inc.

In fact, upon hearing about the plan for the buffer wall — formerly known as the Harry Bridges Boulevard Buffer Project — in 1994, neighborhood activist Gertrude Schwab told the Los Angeles Times, “We might as well put up barbed wire and machine guns on top and tell the community to stay out.”

Port officials listened to the complaints and worked to develop another plan. The result: a waterfront development project that included 98 acres of mixed-use development, including parkland — and no concrete barriers.

The residents of Wilmington, an industrial community with few open spaces, applauded the solution.

Public planning workshops began in 2004, and the Port agreed to build the park three years later; construction got underway in 2009. Sasaki was hired to design a sustainable solution and McCann assumed the role of senior project designer.

The first phase of the project, named Wilmington Waterfront Park, was completed in June. The \$55 million project includes a vibrant park that stretches nine city blocks and features paved trails, a waterfront promenade, public art, a pedestrian bridge and recreation facilities, including a playground and splash fountain.

“This one project has doubled the amount of open space in the Wilmington community,” McCann notes. “The park is getting a tremendous amount of use.”

During a dedication ceremony in June, McCann recalls one resident telling the community he was, “tremendously overjoyed that the park came to fruition.”

While the park was intended to be a recreational resource for the community, Sasaki also wanted the project to offer environmental benefits.

The Wilmington Waterfront Project transformed a former brownfield site, constructing planted terraces to serve as noise buffers, installing stormwater management systems to reduce runoff, and using reclaimed water for irrigation. Sand filtration chambers were installed beneath the parking lots to remove oil and sediment from runoff so it’s not carried to the ocean.

Throughout the park, tree groves and drought-tolerant plants help restore wildlife habitats, capture carbon and enhance air quality; walkways and plazas are sloped toward grass swales and planter beds to capture storm water.

Sasaki also made a commitment to source materials from sustainable sources. Most notably, there is no concrete barrier separating the neighborhood from the Port. Instead, planted terraces mitigate noise. “The hill creates an observation deck that the community never had, where they can watch containers going in and out of the Port,” McCann says.

On the side of the landform that faces the Port, stepped terraces create a visually appealing barrier that minimizes air pollution; on the park side, the gently sloping hill offers residents space for relaxation.

McCann is pleased that the design addressed environmental and safety concerns and met the needs of the community.

“The Port really listened to the community, and the community became part of the process — that is what made the project successful,” she says.

Jodi Helmer is the author of [The Green Year: 365 Small Things You Can Do to Make a Big Difference](#) and a frequent contributor to [Urban Farm](#).

COMMENTS

Jodi, it's great to see what can be accomplished when big business listens and works with a neighborhood. It benefits not only the neighborhood but the whole area surrounding the neighborhood.

David, Omaha, NE

Posted: 8/28/2011 6:16:49 AM

nice

i, i, ID

Posted: 8/24/2011 6:26:01 PM

This is a prime example of what can happen when positively focused people channel their energies into making changes for the better. Sure, the concrete barrier wall would probably have cost less and been built faster, but what would the community have had when it was done? Most likely, it would have been simply another graffiti target and would have made the community less appealing. This way, the land values improve, the residents have green space and recreation areas they didn't previously have and the Port of LA comes out smelling like a rose. Win-win-win.

Bruce, Las Vegas, NV

Posted: 8/24/2011 9:30:01 AM

That's great.

Galadriel, Lothlorien, ME

Posted: 8/23/2011 4:34:02 PM