

A LAGOON'S BEST FRIENDS

Plan: FOCL has achievable goals for cleanup.

Several months ago, when we first met the top members of a new Long Beach group calling itself Friends of Colorado Lagoon, we weren't quite sure what to make of them. Nothing personal, but why anyone would want to befriend a dirty, toxic swimming hole was, frankly, a bit lost on us.

That was then. Now we're convinced that the Colorado Lagoon couldn't have a better set of friends.

Why the change? In short, the group (also known as FOCL) has presented a clear, worthwhile and achievable plan to improve the lagoon. FOCL paints a pretty picture of what the Colorado Lagoon could become and its goals are very much within reach.

FOCL first appeared on the environmental scene late last year, when the County of Los Angeles was close to embarking on a controversial project called the Termino Avenue Storm Drain, which would have emptied a large amount of storm water into the lagoon during the most rare, severe floods.

The project included some measures to improve the lagoon, so the divisive question was whether these positives outweighed the potential negatives. At the time we leaned toward the former, while FOCL cautioned that more study was needed.

It turned out that FOCL was right: A Superior Court judge agreed in July that the county had not conducted a sufficiently thorough environmental impact study, and put the storm drain project on hold. Meanwhile, both the California Department of Fish and Game and the National Marine Fisheries Service concluded that the project could significantly harm the lagoon's marine life.

Four months later FOCL has impressively galvanized its mission for the lagoon, beyond merely stopping the county's storm drain project as it was proposed.

FOCL's plans include:

**** Improving water quality by increasing tidal flow and circulation. This can be done, FOCL says, by dredging parts of the lagoon infected with toxic sediment, adding a new channel between the lagoon and Marine Stadium and adding filters and diversion systems to street runoff drains that now empty into the lagoon.***

**** Restoring the lagoon's natural saltwater wetlands in the far-west and northern areas, which are now, and would remain, off limits to swimmers. The restored habitat would be a stopover for migratory birds (the lagoon now sees pelicans, egrets, cormorants, ducks and many other bird species at different times of the year), a more healthy home for marine life, and an educational resource.***

** Creating a nature and marine science education center in what is now an abandoned snack shop. The center could serve the nearly 5,000 public school students who attend school in the immediate area, as well as the larger community.*

** Maintaining the central lagoon area for swimming and recreation, as is done now. Model boat building and sailing would also continue.*

** Developing a more compatible storm water management system, utilizing the latest technologies, to protect communities from flooding without inflicting undue harm on the lagoon ecosystem.*

There is nothing radical or Quixotic (or astronomically expensive) about these plans. At this stage FOCL has kept them general enough to allow scientific studies to dictate specifics.

FOCL's next challenges will be to garner community and political support and, of course, funding. Wisely, the group has decided not to approach the City of Long Beach during its budget crisis, turning instead to state sources of wetlands cleanup and restoration funds, including bond money.

The group submitted a grant proposal to the California Coastal Commission, which will decide in December whether to fund a \$200,000 study and restoration plan for the lagoon. We strongly urge the commission to fund this study, which would be a first step toward securing state funds to complete the project. (The price tag isn't finalized, but preliminary estimates don't sound unreasonable.)

The Colorado Lagoon has deteriorated to the point where many in the community see it as we did little more than a dirty swimming hole. FOCL, like any good friend, sees potential. Its plans for the lagoon deserve support."