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Marina Park in Newport Beach Builds a Community Space for Everyone

by Robert Wilkes

The City of Newport Beach had a modern problem it shares with other waterfront cities: prime waterfront serving a function well below its potential. That emphatically changed on December 5, 2015, when the Newport Beach opened Marina Park, five months ahead of schedule.

Marina Park is on what is called the peninsula, the strand that forms the land barrier protecting Newport Bay. Bisected by Balboa Boulevard, the peninsula has businesses and an ocean beach across the boulevard from the park. Park visitors can walk to the ocean beach with waves and currents typical of coastal California or take their families to the placid harbor-side beach across the bay from picturesque Lido Island.

There's something for everyone at Marina Park. The facility is home to a year-round sailing program and a 23-slip visitor marina. Its multipurpose upland facility features a towering glass-walled lighthouse and a café. The community has embraced it as a venue for weddings. A spacious "mother's beach" is just right for a toddler's first time in the water. The 10.5-acre park has everything for

a fun day on grass, sand or water. A 6,100-square-foot Girl Scout Leadership Center is under construction funded entirely by the Girl Scouts of Orange County.

Development History

The land for Marina Park was acquired in 1919 as a public campsite. In 1965, the city leased plots to owners of mobile homes and created a trailer park. "It was a well-kept secret," said a city manager, "with an incredible view of Newport Bay." While it seems odd to associate upscale Newport Beach with a campsite and a trailer park, the contrast illustrates the explosive transformation of California.

In 1985, the Parks, Beaches and Recreation Commission recommended the site be developed as a public park. The trailers blocked sight lines to Newport Bay and city leaders wanted to open a "window to the bay." They decided to let the leases expire and clear the land.

Park and Marina Design

City leaders were naturally concerned with sharing the waterfront with all

segments of the community and hoped to introduce new people to boating. They succeeded. Marina Park is a model for other cities to emulate. "The project took thirty years, but we eventually opened that window to the bay," said Laura Detweiler, recreational and senior services director for Newport Beach.

Detweiler was a member of the project team that developed Marina Park. A 25-year veteran of parks and recreation, she arrived during the conceptual design phase of the \$35 million project.

"We had many meetings with the community to determine which amenities to include," Detweiler said. "The outdoor fitness course was the first application of its kind in Newport Beach. We have a nautical-themed playground, two back-to-back basketball half-courts and a whole array of recreational classes. Families come to the park to picnic, climb the children's lighthouse and play."

Shannon Levin, management analyst in the Harbor Resources Division of the Public Works Department, managed the marina side of the project and now manages marina operations. "We had a working group of harbor users," Levin said, "and we've been hearing for years that the harbor needed to be more visitor friendly, more welcoming."

"We saw an opportunity to create a one-stop hub for cruisers with the possibility of reciprocal privileges," Levin continued. "There is a lot to do here. It's like a resort with the ocean, businesses, hotels and restaurants all in walking distance. We had moorings in the bay but they were not user friendly. So we designed Marina Park with a short-stay marina for visits of one to thirty days."

Marina Construction

The city retained the architectural and engineering firm Moffatt & Nichol to plan the project and create bid packages for demolition, building the basin, the upland building and the docks. Dutra won the contract to build the basin, seawall and groin wall. Dredging began in 2014. The new basin was carved out of land that once served as a trailer park.

Bellingham Marine won the contract to build the marina. "They toured our project at Alamitos Bay Marina in Long



In December 2015, the City of Newport Beach completed a waterfront project 30 years in the making. Marina Park serves visiting boaters at a 23-slip marina and many others at the sailing school and recreational park.

Beach,” said Eric Noegel, manager of project development for Bellingham Marine, Southwest Division, “and selected our dock system. The timeline was short, but the marina was still completed ahead of schedule.”

“Moffatt and Nichol planned the marina,” Levin said, “and Bellingham Marine worked with them to make the real world changes needed to manufacture the docks and make the marina functional. The marina has 20 40-foot slips and two 55-foot slips accommodating vessels up to 65 feet, in addition to a 200-foot T-head, suitable for “dock and dine” and special events.

“The project challenged us,” Noegel said. “The marina is a combination of standard dock modules and broad platforms, including a long T-head. The marina has a variety of freeboard heights and a lot of odd shapes and dog legs. We had to use all of our manufacturing techniques.”

The T-head modules were match cast and the sections joined with long through-rods. In addition to timber



A shelf was cast into the dock for the gangway, preventing contact with the dock at high tide.

walers, some modules were connected with Bellingham’s Unibolt system.

The project required a shelf cast into the dock for the gangway. “The shelf prevents the gangway from contacting the dock at high tide,” Noegel said. “A

transition plate covers the shelf and rests on the higher freeboard portion of the dock, so the shelf is not visible. It wasn’t in the bid specifications, but we saw the problem and developed a solution.”

The marina is integrated into the park’s overall architectural theme. Round-end finger piers and round piles echo the park’s curvilinear landscaping and the billowed-sail roof lines of the facility. The visitor marina has a comprehensive array of amenities, including Wi-Fi, in-slip pumpouts, fire protection, water and electrical pedestals, dingy racks, restroom, shower and laundry. There is a three-ton jib crane for launching and retrieving trailered boats.

“All our contractors were receptive and easy to work with,” Levin said. “They were problem-solvers and worked to a tight schedule. The project came in under budget and ahead of schedule.”

The 24,000-square-foot community building has a burnished-aluminum roof resembling billowed sails. The attached 71-foot glass-walled lighthouse also serves as the city’s tsunami warning

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system. The facility hosts sailing and other recreational classes and includes the Lighthouse Café.

Environmental Features

Marina Park is designed for sustainability and its upland infrastructure meets LEED-Silver standards. Landscaping includes a water-efficient irrigation system and a drought-resistant lawn with detention basins to minimize water runoff into the bay. The site's 39 original palm trees were replanted in a dramatic arc to frame the landscaping. The park employs LED lighting, photo sensors, skylights, low-E glass, split HVAC units and operable windows in the community center to minimize energy consumption.

The Community

“We have a partnership with University of California, Irvine, to provide sailing programs for all ages and abilities,” Detweiler said. “They learn to be safe in the harbor and they fall in love with the sport. To accommodate the program, we designed two U-shaped sailing basins



The marina layout was a challenge for dock builder Bellingham Marine, but its many manufacturing techniques were able to handle a combination of standard dock modules and broad platforms, as well as T-head and dog leg-shaped docks.

and low-freeboard dinghy platforms. The new marina provides a much larger setting, and we can now offer sailing instruction year-round. Stand-up paddleboards are also popular and introduce new people to the water who may not be able to afford a boat.”

“It was a 30-year journey,” Detweiler said, “but it was worth it. Judging by how the public has embraced the park and its programs, the project is a huge success.” ⚓

Robert Wilkes writes about the marina industry from Bellevue, Washington.

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