

PALO ALTO DAILY NEWS

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Victor Maccharoli / Daily News

The dilapidated yet historic former Sea Scout Base building in Palo Alto's Baylands, once bustling with youngsters learning nautical skills, will be transformed into an environmental education center by a nonprofit group. The city's architectural review board approved the plans Thursday.

The nonprofit, whose volunteers teach hands-on natural science lessons in classrooms across the Peninsula, plans to open its new offices to the public for nature photography exhibits and birdwatching programs. The boat-like structure at the end of Embarcadero Road, built in 1941 and shuttered after the Palo Alto Yacht Harbor closed in the 1980s, will be shipshape again.

"This is returning to the community an iconic building," said Allan Berkowitz, the group's executive director. Since it's right next to the city's airport and duck pond, "Generations of Peninsula residents have grown up seeing this building. For the last 15 years or so they've seen it deteriorating."

To get permission for the restoration, Berkowitz's group had to navigate through a slew of environmental regulations by more than a dozen different agencies. The unanimous approval from Palo Alto's architectural review board on Thursday was the final stamp at the city level; the remaining state and federal sign-offs are considered formalities.

Beth Bunnenberg of Palo Alto's historic resources board, which also approved the project, called it "an extremely important historic structure." Along with San Francisco's Maritime Museum, she said, it's a rare nautically themed example of the Depression-era "streamlined modern" style.

For its part, the Architectural Review Board was impressed with the project's environmental sensitivity. It will make use of natural ventilation, a permeable parking surface and, if a donor can be found, solar panels on the roof. The San Francisco Bay Trail, which now breaks at the unusable building, will run right across its front porch.

Following a groundbreaking ceremony on Sept. 14, construction will be scheduled around the breeding season of the endangered Clapper Rail bird, Berkowitz said. That means no heavy work between February and September.

Once open, the building will house a staff of eight to 10 employees, which today works in an office building on a frontage street off of San Antonio Road.

"We'll have so much more visibility, right there in the nature preserve," said Carol Fields, a member of the Environmental Volunteers board. "It's going to be a huge boost for the organization."

The project will be finished either next summer or in January 2010. Berkowitz explained, "It all depends on the Clapper Rail."

Relic to rise again

Environmental group's renovation of Sea Scout Base sails to approval

By Will Oremus / Daily News Staff Writer

Propped on decaying piers, draped with spider webs, the condemned Sea Scout Base languishes in the greenish muck of the Palo Alto's Baylands Nature Preserve like a half-sunk ship. Where once it bustled with teenagers learning the ropes of seamanship, it sits boarded shut and silent but for the cries of shorebirds and the scuffle of mice.

At high tide, it floods.

Beginning in October, however, the historic building will rise again - literally. The nonprofit Environmental Volunteers got city approval on Thursday for a \$2.9 million renovation that will lift the three-story structure four feet above the marsh that threatens to engulf it.

Abandoned for 17 years, the base will be transformed into a headquarters for the Palo Alto-based educational group. In exchange for fixing up the city-owned treasure, the Environmental Volunteers will pay just \$1 a year in rent for 40 years.

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