

First phase of \$330 million Dana Point Harbor renovation project to start in fall



Houses line the cliffs surrounding Dana Point Harbor in Dana Point, CA, on Friday, January 22, 2021. (Photo by Jeff Gritchen, Orange County Register/SCNG)

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New docks and piles should start to appear in Dana Point Harbor’s West Basin later this year.

And, when they do, it will signal the start of the first phase of a long-awaited \$330 million renovation project of the harbor.

“Now we actually have a permit and it gives certainty to the project,” Joe Ueberroth, founder and president of Bellwether Financial Group, a Newport Beach-based marina developer, said about the project recently receiving a key final approval from the California Coastal Commission.

“I made a commitment to move the project,” Ueberroth said. “This is a commitment made and a commitment kept.”





A new marina plan for the Dana Point Harbor renovation has been approved by the Coastal Commission. (File photo by Paul Bersebach, OC Register/SCNG)

To secure the commission’s permit Bellwether had to meet a series of conditions placed upon the project by the commission in September. Among those, he agreed to create an environmental justice program to expose underserved youth from inland communities to water activities, a plan for protecting the harbor sea lions while the project is underway and a plan for enhancing water quality in the harbor.

With the Coastal Commission OK for construction of the new marina, Ueberroth will next submit permit drawings to the county and then pull permits to begin work.

The new marina is expected to cost around \$100 million and, so far, the projected costs are on course, Ueberroth said.

Bellwether and two other development groups working as Dana Point Harbor Partners took over a 66-year lease of the harbor from the county in 2018.

Also put in motion is a project to renovate the harbor at an expected cost of \$330 million.

The Dana Point Harbor Revitalization Plan includes reconstruction of the commercial core and the east and west marinas, two new hotels and fully rebuilt docks. Under the public-private partnership, the developers will design, fund and build the improvements, then operate those portions of the harbor with the 66-year lease before returning the property to the county.

Bryon Ward, of Burnham-Ward Properties, and Bob Olson, of R.D. Olson Development, will work together on the harbor’s commercial core.

“We have a level of certainty we didn’t have before,” Ueberroth said.

The harbor project plans to be one of many firsts. Both the environmental justice program and the sea lion monitoring program are pioneering efforts.

“We’re the first to develop it,” Ueberroth said of the program to help people from inland communities become more familiar with the water. “For us, it was a greenfield; how do we do it right? At first, it was just sailing; we decided to make it broader. I’m really excited about this. It will benefit a lot of youth who don’t get near the coast.”

The plan includes providing ocean experiences to 1,000 children a year. And with being on the water comes the ability to swim. So, Bellwether has partnered with local YMCAs to help fund swimming lessons and provide outreach to the community. Big Brothers Big Sisters, OC Youth Sailing and the Surfrider Foundation are among other groups involved.

Dana Point Harbor is known for its sea lion population. The Coastal Commission made sure that Bellwether had a plan to mitigate any disturbances to the animals.

A biologist will be on location to record the animal’s behavior once the construction starts.

Many sea lions gather near the Orange County Sheriff Department’s Harbor Patrol dock and the bait barge. Because of that, Ueberroth said he plans to begin constructing the docks in the West Basin, an area farther from their main gathering places. From there he will likely move to the East Basin in 2022 and work there. The timing will coincide with some of the land-side development.

“We had to locate an area in the harbor where there are the least pinnipeds,” Ueberroth said. “Biologists will monitor the sea lions and make sure the construction isn’t harmful. If it is, we’ll stop.”

The main concern is the need to drive piles 15 feet into the harbor’s bedrock. The biologists will monitor the impact of sound both through the air and underwater.

“I don’t think we’ll have a problem, but it will be interesting because we’re documenting it,” Ueberroth said.

And, water quality is another area where Bellwether will make an impact. The developer has been focused on this in other projects around the world for a decade, Ueberroth said.

Instead of using treated lumber that might leach into the water, Bellwether is using fiberglass. Also, there will be no metal on the floats.

“The biggest disturbance you can have in the harbor is reconstruction,” Ueberroth said. “Metal over time will rust. By eliminating metal, we will have a product that will last longer. For us, that’s to have it last the length of our lease. We looked at every component – how can we eliminate it and still have the same strength. What we will deliver in Dana Point will be unique.”

Fifth District Orange County Supervisor Lisa Bartlett, who pushed for the harbor renovation for years even while she was on the Dana Point City Council, congratulated Ueberroth and his team on getting the Coastal Commission permit.

“Joe and his company have the experience and expertise to deliver a best-in-class project, which includes all-new amenities for the boating community and the visiting public,” she said.

Donna Kalez, who manages the harbor’s oldest whale watching and fishing charter business, said she has been waiting for her dilapidated and decaying docks to be replaced for two decades.

With a fleet of 17 boats at Dana Wharf, she couldn’t be more excited.

“It’s a great way to celebrate our 50th anniversary,” she said. “We congratulate the partners on this.”

The new docks will not only make the harbor look nicer, but will make it safer for hundreds who near-daily visit the harbor.

Jim Miller, who operates the popular Coffee Importers near the wharf’s waterfront, is also thrilled. For decades, he too, as head of the former Dana Point Merchants Association, pushed for the harbor’s renovation.

“I’m excited to see the revitalization process begin with construction,” he said. “It’s been a long wait.”

The harbor renovation is expected to be done by 2026. Ueberroth said the largest single-owned marina will “raise the bar for marinas and coastal developments of the future.”