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Center to let visitors learn about reserve

Elfin Forest offers various habitats

By Linda Lou

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NORTH COUNTY – Elfin Forest is where Kevin Barnard, 50, spent a lot of time walking and running in his youth, but it wasn't until a few years ago that he realized how special the rural area really is.

Barnard, managing director of The Escondido Creek Conservancy, was serving as a board member of the watershed preservation group when a biologist on the board explained the biodiversity of the area. He was amazed.

Looking at the hills surrounding the Elfin Forest Recreational Reserve yesterday, Barnard identified some of the varied habitats, including mixed chaparral and coastal sage scrub. He said some of the wetlands are home to the least Bell's vireo, an endangered bird.

Knowing all that he does now, Barnard said, he is excited that park visitors will be able to learn about the area's ecology when an interpretive center under construction opens in the spring. The 1,000-square-foot center is in the reserve's



CHARLIE NEUMAN / Union-Tribune

Workers are framing the roof of the interpretive center under construction at the Elfin Forest Recreation Reserve in Escondido. Construction began in June, and the center will open in the spring.

parking lot.

Construction began in June. Workers are now framing the roof of the circular building, which has wall panels made out of a recycled foam and concrete compound, called Perform Wall. The strong waterproof material is fire resistant and provides a high degree of insulation.

Once the roof is finished, a dome will go on top. The roof will be covered with plants so that the building will better blend in with its surroundings. Solar panels will be installed on an awning at the center's front entrance, where there will be a small outdoor amphitheater.

Art will adorn the interior floor and roof.

A tile mosaic depicting the Escondido Creek watershed will be on the floor. The roof will have a skylight in the center and four quadrants with murals depicting the four seasons.

“It's going to be beautiful,” said Jeff Anderson, a park supervisor for the Olivenhain Municipal Water District.

The building's design and planned artwork were the ideas of a father-and-son team, artist James Hubbell and his son, Drew, an architect.

The reserve is owned and operated by the water district. Initially, the district had plans for only a basic interpretive center after receiving a matching \$68,500 grant from the state, Anderson said.

But the creek conservancy, which has land abutting the water district, soon got involved by collecting funds for a nicer center. It raised about \$500,000, much of which came from private donations, Barnard said.

About 7,000 people visit the park a month, Anderson said. It is a popular destination for hikers, bicyclists and equestrians. Dogs are allowed to go off-leash in some areas.

What kinds of displays or exhibits will go inside the building will ultimately be determined by how much money is raised, Barnard said. Donations can be made online at www.escondidocreek.org.



CHARLIE NEUMAN / Union-Tribune
The Escondido Creek flows under the bridge leading to main trails at the reserve near the interpretive center.

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