

Bluebird Canyon restoration wins awards

Geotechnical and civil engineers recognize city response to June 1, 2005, landslide.

Barbara Diamond, Laguna Beach Coastline Pilot, 10-1-10

The restoration of Bluebird Canyon after a devastating landslide in 2005 has won two prestigious awards, announced at the Sept. 21 City Council meeting.

Geo-Technical Engineer Hannes Richter presented awards to Mayor Elizabeth Pearson from the California Geotechnical Assn. and from the American Society of Civil Engineers for work in Orange and Los Angeles counties.

"It was a disaster, but it was also a defining moment for the residents and the city to work together," said Richter.

The award-winning project was a challenge, the successful completion of which was made possible by the city's outstanding leadership, according to Richter, who worked on the project.

"But it started with Elizabeth Pearson, who said, 'We will make this happen,'" Richter said.

Pearson was mayor in 2005.

Richter also credited City Manager Ken Frank for bringing Bob Burnham on board as community recovery coordinator to work with the families whose homes were damaged or destroyed. Burnham also worked with families whose property and lives were disrupted during the restoration.

"This award truly belongs to the city," Richter said.

Pearson accepted the award on behalf of the city.

"We are so lucky to have Hannes living and working in the Laguna Beach," Pearson said.

Richter is the principal of Geofirm.

Asked why the project was recognized, Richter said major disasters aren't all that common and the way the project was handled was outstanding.

Other disasters get tied up for years in technological and design processes, he said.

"It was also a difficult project because the site was affected," Richter said. "There were a lot of challenges. [The fact that] it was done so quickly and so successfully made it special."

Among the challenges was the relocation of tons of dirt until it was moved again to restore the hillside and finding the equipment to do it — one huge piece came from Sweden because it was not available in the United States.

Paying for the restoration was also a challenge. The voters came through by approving a temporary half-cent

sales tax to help pay for the restoration of infrastructure when it looked like federal and state aid might not be approved.

As promised the tax was repealed by the council — and almost two years ahead of the original sunset date, as recommended by the oversight committee.

Pearson's appeal to Sen. Dianne Feinstein proved to be a turning point. After visiting the site and meeting with some of the displaced families, Feinstein pledged financial assistance — and she also came through.

But the public money could not be used to assist the homeless families.

It was up to Laguna's residents to meet the immediate needs of the families displaced by the slide — housing, clothing, counseling if wanted.

By the end of the day of the slide, every family whose home was no longer habitable had a roof over their heads, clean clothes, even a toothbrush.

Spurred by Pearson, residents turned out their pockets to raise funds for long-term housing and other assistance.

The project was completed without a lawsuit being filed, largely credited to the city's response, led by Pearson, Burnham, the council and Frank.