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San Jose will soon have San Francisco Bay boating access again

By Paul Rogers
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Stillman Kelly remembers how, in the 1970s, he loved to set out in a wooden boat from San Jose's waterfront and spend countless hours enjoying San Francisco Bay.

"It was a 28-foot Chris Craft cabin cruiser, with a big Chevy engine. It was gorgeous. It slept four," said the retired Lockheed engineer. "We'd take it all the way up to Yerba Buena Island. I used it for striped bass fishing, all sorts of things. My kids loved it. I'd take the neighbors' kids and their dads. We had birthday parties out there."

Kelly and other Santa Clara County residents first got access to the bay from San Jose in 1968, when the county built a marina at Alviso, the tiny community on San Jose's northern edges. But the marina silted up badly, and after a few costly dredging projects, Santa Clara County supervisors abandoned it to bull rushes and mud in 1985.

Now, for the first time in a quarter century, San Jose's waterfront is about to reopen to boats again.

Santa Clara County supervisors are scheduled to vote April 21 to put out for bid a \$2.7 million project to build a concrete boat ramp, along with parking for 26 vehicles and boat trailers, at Alviso Marina County Park.

Construction is expected to begin in August and be completed in January. When finished, the new facility will reopen San Jose's connection with Northern California's pre-eminent natural feature.

"This is a fabulous resource. People will be launching kayaks, powerboats, rowboats and canoes," said Lisa Killough, Santa Clara County parks director. "I expect to see families going fishing. And it's going to provide a really nice area for people to get out and view the bird life, which is amazing here."

The 133-foot-long boat ramp will provide access to Alviso Slough, a channel that winds four miles before emptying into the open bay. Construction work will involve a small amount of initial dredging — about 2,000 cubic yards — to keep the channel 6 feet deep at low tide and 9 feet deep at high tide.

The closest places to put boats into the bay now for Silicon Valley residents are Palo Alto, Redwood City and San Leandro, each roughly a half-hour from San Jose.

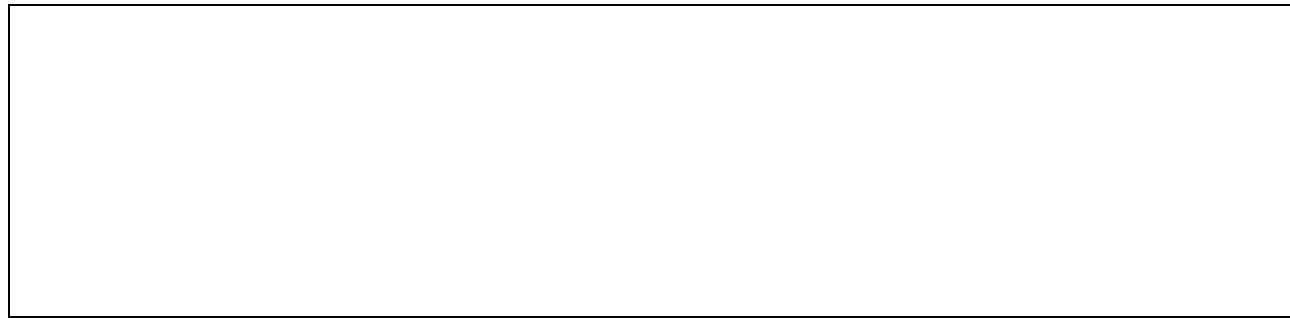
Bob Power, executive director of the Santa Clara Valley Audubon Society, said the project will offer people a chance to see wildlife up close, particularly if they use nonmotorized boats that won't scare away birds, he said.

"Every time you turn the corner you might run into a group of shorebirds, or ducks or geese with youngsters in tow, or an egret," Power said. "You get a chance to be much closer to species that you would very rarely get to see otherwise."

The project has been years in the making.

By putting the boat ramp 100 feet to the west of the old marina, on a slough that empties the Guadalupe

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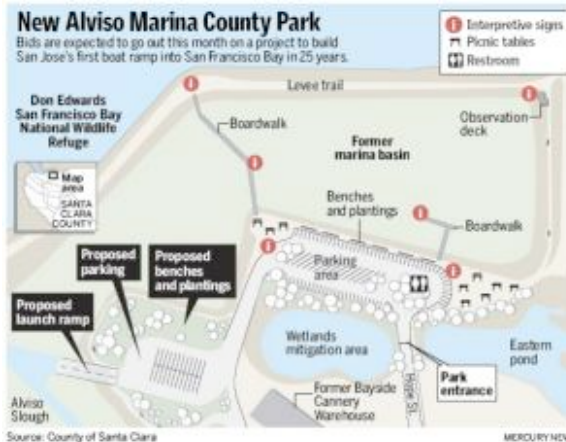


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River, planners hope the scouring motion of the running water will prevent a repeat of the muddy mess that occurred a generation ago.



(Click on image to enlarge.)

In 2005, county officials finished the first phase of the project, a \$3 million renovation of the park with the Santa Clara Valley Water District that included new trails, flood-control levees, parking, restrooms, picnic areas and interpretive signs. It features a boardwalk with signs explaining the colorful history of Alviso — a former Gold Rush waterfront once buzzing with steamboats, fishermen and saloons — whose port dreams ended when railroads came to dominate.

The boat ramp portion of the job was originally scheduled to be finished in 2007. But red tape from fundraising, land swaps, lease negotiations and extra environmental studies required by state and federal agencies slowed completion.

"It's heavily regulated because people want to protect the bay," Killough said. "This is a project that has universal support, but because it is located in

such a sensitive environment, we have to really dot every 'i' and cross every 't.' "

Thursday, the State Lands Commission voted to provide the county a free 25-year lease on five parcels of land it owns to allow the project to move forward. The county still must obtain six permits from the Army Corps of Engineers, the U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service and other agencies, but those have been in the works for a while now and are expected by July, Killough said.

For longtime Alviso residents like Dick Santos, the project is a godsend. He still remembers the old marina, with 76 slips.

"You could launch a boat at any tide. I caught the biggest fish at the time in the history of Alviso — a 7-foot-9 inch, 150-pound sturgeon — in 1979. It took me an hour-and-a-half to land. I won \$100 cash in the Lockheed Derby. The Mercury News printed it in the sports page."

Now, Santos said, he hopes the new boating facility will bring people to Alviso, particularly school groups and families who spend so much time in traffic and cubicles.

"For lots of young kids, this will be the first time in their lives they will be able to put a boat in the bay from San Jose," he said. "It brings so much opportunity. People can enjoy it. Everybody can enjoy it."

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