

Ranchos Together In Year Of Celebration

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"It's serendipity," Pamela Seager said. "We're both completing major projects this year, and this just made sense."

This is the Year of the Ranchos — Mayor Bob Foster and the City Council said so on Tuesday night. What that means to the public is a year of events designed to reawaken awareness and pride in the city's twin historic sites, Rancho Los Alamitos and Rancho Los Cerritos.

Both sites were donated to the city by the Bixby clan, whose extended family developed them as working ranches in the 1800s. Rancho Los Alamitos is on the hill above the California State University, Long Beach, campus in east Long Beach while Rancho Los Cerritos is on the arroyo hidden behind the Virginia Country Club.

But while the ranchos both came from the Bixbys, both boast historic homes and both highlight their landscapes, there are as many differences than likenesses. At least that's the view of the two executive directors — Seager at Los Alamitos and Ellen Calomiris at Rancho Los Cerritos.

Start with the management. Rancho Los Cerritos is city owned and operated through the Parks, Recreation and Marine Department. The Rancho Los Cerritos Foundation plays a support role, including a major fund-raising effort.

Rancho Los Alamitos is city owned, but it has been operated for the last 25 years by the Rancho Los Alamitos Foundation through a lease with the city. The foundation has raised most of the money for restoration and renovation while the city provides operating money annually.

That deal with the foundation has allowed Los Alamitos to create and complete almost all of a master plan to restore and upgrade the rancho. Work is nearing completion of a new education and meeting center that includes an area telling the tale of 1,500 years of history at the site.

Los Cerritos has its own master plan, with the new visitors center and entryway considered the second phase of a 20- to 25-year plan. The visitors center will allow for orientation and expansion of the living history program.

“Living history is our signature,” Calomiris said. “It will play a central role in all our events, including the partnership with Long Beach Reads One Book (which is focusing on “Zorro,” including a visit from author Isabel Allende).”

Rancho Los Alamitos also will be part of the One Book festivities in March, but with more of a focus on the Native American component of the story. That fits with the rancho’s mission to tell the story of all the people who have made the ranch site home.

The Rancho Los Alamitos master plan had 167 action items, and Seager said. The completion of the new community center, along with a classroom and relocation of the barns to their original configuration, counts as completion through number 165. Everyone involved, from families of those who have worked on the rancho in the distant past to the construction crew at work today, will be invited to help with the celebration this year, she said.

“The Bixby story is an important one to our rancho,” Seager said. “But it should be understood only in context. There’s also the story of the landscape, and how it was resilient to change as it served as home to changing populations.”

Both ranchos have a full year of events planned, ranging from lecture series to grand opening galas. Those openings are expected in May for Rancho Los Cerritos and June for Rancho Los Alamitos, but both ranchos are open for visits and events throughout the year.

For more information about the ranchos, visit www.rancholosalamitos.org or www.rancholoscerritos.org.