

City Can't See Forest for the Ipe

By Tom Hennesy [column]

As you read this, 67,000 square feet of Brazilian hardwood sit in a Tustin lumberyard, awaiting removal to Long Beach.

Bought by the city for \$300,000, the wood, ipe (pronounced EE-pay), is to be used in the Queensway Bay boardwalk.

Environmentalists think this is a bad idea. They say officials, having since learned the wood comes from Brazil's shrinking virgin rain forest, should refuse the shipment and risk monetary penalties and/or litigation. But, the city seems set on building the walk in time for the June 20 opening of the Aquarium of the Pacific.

"Three hundred acres (of wood) are falling at the stroke of an ego," says David Wolfberg, of the Venice-based Action Resource Center.

While promising to revise its purchasing policies, the city's position is it bought the wood after being told it was environmentally correct.

A mistake in N.Y.

Refusing the shipment will not save the planet, say some who side with the city. That's true, but it is also the height of responsibility, and could be said of every local environmental issue in America.

Beyond that, ipe simply seems to be a bad buy. It went into New York's Coney Island boardwalk in the 1960s and now is warping and being replaced.

"There are parts of the boardwalk that, by the time they become 20 years old, are pretty ratty," says Tim Keating, a New York representative of Rainforest Relief. "You have salt. You have sand blowing up and acting as an abrasive when people walk on it. You have ultra-violet radiation that breaks down the hardwood pretty well."

Kim Mizrahi, also of Action Resource Center, says she and others tried unsuccessfully to interest the city in synthetic substitutes, such as plastic, which are cheaper, more durable, and, in some cases, guaranteed up to 50 years — as opposed to 20 for ipe.

The substitutes are also easier to get, says Long Beach businessman Michael Roddy (Green Framing Systems). "One dealer of plastic material that I talked to is saying he can give one-day delivery at half the price of ipe."

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Keating adds that rejecting wood after it has been ordered is a common practice. "The wood can be rejected even at the job site. We have round numerous reasons for being able to do this."

Pedestrians on plastic

It seems unlikely tourists would throw up their hands in horror upon discovering they are walking on plastic instead of ipe. Most tourists, in fact, probably don't know ipe from Shinola.

Environmentalists argue if the city will hang tough, there may be a way out of this dilemma. Says Wolfberg, "Ask any of these people to name one single ipe tree farm or plantation in the entire world. You have to go into virgin forest to get it. There is no way the wood in Tustin came from a tree farm."

The question has merit because of a July 11, 1997, letter to Robert Paternoster, head of the Queensway Bay project. The letter, from the project architect, Erhenkrantz, Eckstut and Kunz, describes ipe as "a harvested plantation South American hardwood from sustainable yield forests and tree farms."

This may be a matter of semantics, but the environmentalists say it means officials were given incorrect information. "The architectural firm totally misrepresented the material," says Keating.

Because of this, say the environmentalists, any liability regarding payment for the wood should be shifted to the architect. The city, they argue, would then be off the hook and free to build a more lasting and less-expensive boardwalk of synthetic material.

Paternoster questions that, but says, "We agree with the environmentalists that there is a better way to have done this. But the way we did it is legitimate."

If you have managed to stay with all this, let me further complicate it by noting purchasers of such wood are required to get environmental approval for the wood they buy. However, even environmentalists disagree on which of the various certifying agencies are reputable. Keating himself admits the purchasing process is confusing. An estimated 80 percent of ipe coming to the U.S. is said to arrive here illegally.

Given all that, I am hard pressed to come down on the side of environmentalists as forcefully as they probably would like me to do. But I still find it unconscionable that anyone would take the cop-out position that rejecting the hardwood in Long Beach "is not going to save the planet."

Hopefully, Queensway Bay and city officials have learned from this. And that it will never be an issue again. Meanwhile, I, for one, am perfectly willing to walk on plastic.

Tom Henessy's viewpoint appears Sundays, Tuesdays, Thursdays, and Fridays. He can be reached at (562) 499-1270, or on email via Scribe17@aol.com.

CORRECTIONS from Action Resource Center: The acreage is estimated at 3,000 not 300. The spelling of the architecture firm is "Ehrenkrantz..." not "Erhenkrantz".

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