The Historic Sewage Treatment Plant
[aka “the Digester”]

Thursday, March 5th, 7:30-9:30 pm
Robert Borthwick • Krista Nichols • Glenna Matthews

On March 5th, the Laguna Beach Historical Society will present a program on the historic Sewage Treatment Plant [aka “the Digester”]. This facility ceased operation in 1983, and in 1989, most of the plant was demolished with the exception of the Digester and adjacent office, which was saved. In his 2014 book titled “The New Deal in Orange County”, author Charles Epting refers to the Digester as “the most interesting sewage treatment plant in the county”. Designed with a Normandy castle tower, winding exterior stairway, and a Mediterranean influence, the remaining structure has been an iconic sentinel at the Village Entrance for over 85 years. Many people feel that this quaint and charming building embodies the special artistic qualities of Laguna Beach. On September 25, the City Council voted 3-2 to demolish the Digester and an EIR is pending.

The Sewage Treatment Plant was completed in 1935 with New Deal federal funding, and helped to make Laguna a functioning town. Building the sewer plant created many construction jobs for local unemployed residents at the depth of the Great Depression, and saved local families from economic devastation. In the past decades, the office portion of the structure has served as a storage facility for police evidence, and the tower structure is vacant.

The building is built with solid reinforced concrete walls nearly a foot thick, so its bones are strong although the (continued on page 2)

Photograph top left: The Digester building including original spiral staircase.
Photograph bottom left: The Digester building as it stands today.
exterior has faded over the years. The Digester tower extends some 20 feet underground, and the remaining composted material from almost 40 years ago will soon be removed in preparation for either demolition or preservation of the structure.

The program will be presented by Bob Borthwick – local resident and landscape architect, Krista Nicholds – Historic Resources Specialist and President of Preserve Orange County, and Glenna Matthews – local resident and retired professor of American History.

**Photograph 1:** The original plant prior to 1989 demolition.

**Photograph 2:** The interior of the Laguna Beach Old Sewage Disposal during the 1938 California Sewage Works Association Conference and the Laguna Beach Plant Tour. Image taken from the National Archives and Records Administration.

**Photograph 3:** The venting pipe was designed to resemble a lighthouse.

**Photograph 4:** Lighthouse on the hill.

“The 1935 Laguna Beach Sewage Treatment Plant is a significant surviving public works facility from a community that greatly upgraded its infrastructure in the 1930’s with New Deal assistance to accommodate projected growth. The town could not become the popular artistic and tourist destination without this facility. The facility design, intended to blend with the romantic geography and early twentieth century architecture of the community, now is a major landmark for the town. It retains strong integrity aspects of location, design, materials, workmanship, feeling, setting, and association.”

- From: Cultural Resources Reconnaissance for the Village Entrance Project, Laguna Beach, California, SWCA Cultural Resources Report Database No. 2006-200, April 2006.
Greetings to all our members and friends (who I hope will soon become members.) Our next program for the Laguna Beach Historical Society at 7:30-9:00 pm at the SusiQ Center will be held on Thursday, March 5th. Robert Borthwick, Laguna Greenbelt Board Member will make a presentation on the history of the 88 year old sewage/digester building which was built by the W.P.A. Since we scheduled this meeting, Bob Borthwick contacted Barbara and Greg MacGillivray who pledged to donate $500,000 to help preserve the historic building which is located at the Village Entrance. Barbara wrote in an email that "The Digester Building is one of the few historical buildings that so many us in Laguna love and hope will carry on the feeling of our charming art community. In our opinion, to demolish it would compromise our civic image and community values that are committed to historic preservation." Mark Christy of The Ranch at Laguna Beach wrote in an email that, "It is important locally and I feel that the history of its origins makes it essential to preserve for future generations. Together, we can take this decaying structure and make it a jewel to be proud of." We welcome all of you to attend Bob Borthwick’s presentation. Questions from the attendees will follow.

"Preserve your memories, keep them well. What you forget you can never retell."

- Louisa May Alcott
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