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New leadership named for Crystal Cove nonprofit

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Pacific Coast Highway divides a modern Crystal Cove housing tract, above, and beach cottages from a bygone era, below.

CINDY YAMANAKA, FILE PHOTO

By **LAYLAN CONNELLY** / STAFF WRITER

First on the list of things to do: understand the heartbeat of Crystal Cove.

Alix Hobbs, a longtime leader in environmental advocacy, knows she has a big task ahead as she slips into her new role as CEO and president of Crystal Cove Alliance, a nonprofit that works to preserve the legacy of the historic area wedged between Newport Beach and Laguna's coast.

"I'm working to get to know the staff and the vision the board has put together," Hobbs said on her first day of work earlier this week. "Once I'm knowledgeable about that, then working with the staff, board and the local community to work on the restoration – phase three – of the cottages on the north beach."

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Alix Hobbs

Hometown: Grew up in New York near the Long Island Sound, where she fell in love with the ocean and being out in the water.

Experience: President and CEO of the Heal the Bay environmental organization in Santa Monica.

Hobbies: Anything outdoors, most recently stand-up paddleboarding.

First impressions: "What I appreciate about Newport and Laguna is the focus on the ocean. It's still very much part of the community here – I feel like the community has embraced the Pacific Ocean."

Did you know?

- During Prohibition, rum smugglers used the cove to smuggle their booty ashore. For years, bottles could still be found buried in the sand.

- The Crystal Cove Historic District is a 12.3-acre coastal portion of the 2,791-acre Crystal Cove State Park.

- The cottages are considered historic because of the vernacular architecture, which means they were built without design or plan, in an eclectic style.

Cottage No. 34 – now the cultural center – was used as a language school, mostly for the Japanese farming community in the '30s and '40s. In World War II, the military used it as a coastal lookout for enemy ships.

Source: California State Parks

The final leg of repairing and sprucing up 17 deteriorating cottages for public use comes with a hefty price tag: an estimated \$26 million.

Maintaining the tucked-away area as a place where people can be transported to a bygone era has long been the goal of Crystal Cove Alliance, which was formed by longtime resident Laura Davick in 1999 to stop a planned luxury resort from taking over the area.

The alliance teamed with the state to earn Crystal Cove designation as a historic area and to restore the cottages for public use, which started in 2004.

The area has a rich history, the cottages dating back to the '20s and '30s. Postwar-era families would camp out on the beach and soon a community emerged. Movies such as "Treasure Island" and "Beaches" were filmed there.

Of the original 46 cottages, nearly 30 have been turned into overnight rentals, a museum, cultural center and a restaurant that sits on the sand.

Hobbs, selected after a nationwide search spanning 10 months, said permitting is soon to be completed by the California Coastal Commission – an "exciting milestone," she said.

"A lot of planning has gone into the restoration of the cottages," she said. "At that point we will be ready to work."

Hobbs, who recently moved from Marina del Rey to Newport Beach, said she appreciates the area's nod to the past, as well as the ability for the area to allow families and friends to "unplug from their lives and enjoy the beautiful waves and the marine sanctuary here and to build those family memories."

She said she also fell in love with the educational undertones throughout Crystal Cove.

"When guests come to visit here, they take away from it ways to be environmental stewards," she said. "That's what I've been working on, protecting and saving landscapes and water quality."

Hobbs said she hopes to expand those educational programs, specifically to allow more undeserved children to visit the coast and learn about the environment. She also wants to think strategically about climate change and how the area will be affected by future issues facing coastal regions.

"There are thoughts about having one of the cottages be dedicated to climate change and sea level rise so there can be programs that educate the visitors of the cottages," she said. "There's a lot of potential here."

Crystal Cove timeline

Some movies filmed at the cove

"Treasure Island" (1918)

"Stormswept" (1923)

"Sadie Thompson" (1928)

"The Isle of Lost Ships" (1929)

"Treasure Island" (1934)

"Two of a Kind" (1951)

"Herbie Rides Again" (1974)

"Beaches" (1988)

Source: California State Parks

1918: The silent film "Treasure Island" is shot at Crystal Cove; the film crew leaves behind a palm frond set.

1920s: Pacific Coast Highway is built, and tourists make the beach a destination for day trips and camping. Visitors start setting up tents at Crystal Cove; cottages are built.

1927: A lumber ship capsizes off the coast, providing more building materials for cottages. The area is named Crystal Cove by Beth Wood because the water was always crystal-clear.

1946: Postwar-era families come to the cove to pitch live-in tents and spend summer days swimming, enjoying cocktails, barbecues, and singing around bonfires.

1962: The Orange County Board of Supervisors outlaws tent camping on local beaches.

1979: The National Register of Historic Places considers Crystal Cove as the last remnant of 1920s-era California beach life, giving it a historic designation.

Early 2001: More than 600 people pack a public meeting, opposing state plans for a \$35 million resort. The state drops a resort contract with the developer. The public California Coastal Conservancy gives the state \$2 million to buy out the contract.

April 2001: The first of several community workshops lets residents say what they'd like to see at Crystal Cove.

July 2001: Cottage residents start moving out after dodging three eviction notices in 22 years.

October 2001: State unveils a preliminary proposal for Crystal Cove based on recommendations from the workshops.

October 2002: State releases its final plan and environmental impact report.

February 2003: The preservation and public-use plan is approved by the State Park and Recreation Commission.

February 2004: State awards an \$8 million contract for the Crystal Cove project to Newport Beach-based Metro Builders and Engineers Group.

March 2004: Work begins on the first phase of the project.

April 2006: Thirteen of the 46 cottages open for rental to the public. Several more cottages are restored and open through the next few years.

Early 2014: The Berns Environmental Study Loop – created from a \$1 million donation from the Berns family – includes six mini field-stations, an amphitheater, fire pit, staging area and a half-mile loop through the canyon.

Source: California State Parks

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2 of 3

With the restored cottages behind them, a couple takes a morning stroll on the beach at Crystal Cove State Park.

MARK RIGHTMIRE, FILE PHOTO



3 of 3

Restored cottages sit on the hillside in the federally listed Historic District on the beach at Crystal Cove State Park.

MARK RIGHTMIRE, FILE PHOTO

