

OUR REGION

MONDAY
June 16, 2008



THE SAN DIEGO
UNION-TRIBUNE

LOGAN JENKINS

Solution to rising gas prices

Among North County's Republicans, the answer to the prospect of \$5-a-gallon gas is simple: free-market principles and drilling for oil. **B2**



SAN DIEGO

No help from supplement

UCSD study finds seniors taking hormone supplement DHEA to improve memory and sex are wasting money. **B3**

LETTER FROM WASHINGTON

Pump-pain blame game

When things go bad, lawmakers are bound to turn the topic into an opportunity to brand their political foes as self-serving scoundrels. **B3**

WEATHER

Forecasts for county, state, nation and world. **B8**

PUBLIC SAFETY

Vehicle crashes into home; three minors arrested. **B2**

CHULA VISTA

Run-down party boat removed from bay

**Delicate operation
cost Port \$313,000**

By Tanya Mannes
STAFF WRITER

An old disco party boat that was mired in south San Diego Bay for more than five years has finally been towed out in a complex operation that cost \$313,000 in public money.

It is the most expensive boat-removal project in the San Diego Unified Port District's history, almost nine times more than the next most expensive boat removal in 2002.

The Port District spent years in court seeking to force the boat's owners to remove the 120-foot vessel and finally obtained title to it in a settlement last year.

In May, the Port Commission approved a contract with the Marine Group Boat Works, formerly the South Bay Boat Yard, to handle the removal project after concluding it was too risky to be done in-house. Years of neglect had left the boat so fragile it could have disintegrated in the sensitive

SEE Party boat, B4

► PARTY BOAT

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Vessel 'folded up like a big tin can' upon its removal

tidelands. Of particular concern were its full septic tank and buckets of unknown chemicals, possibly cleaning solvent.

The removal on June 2 took seven hours.

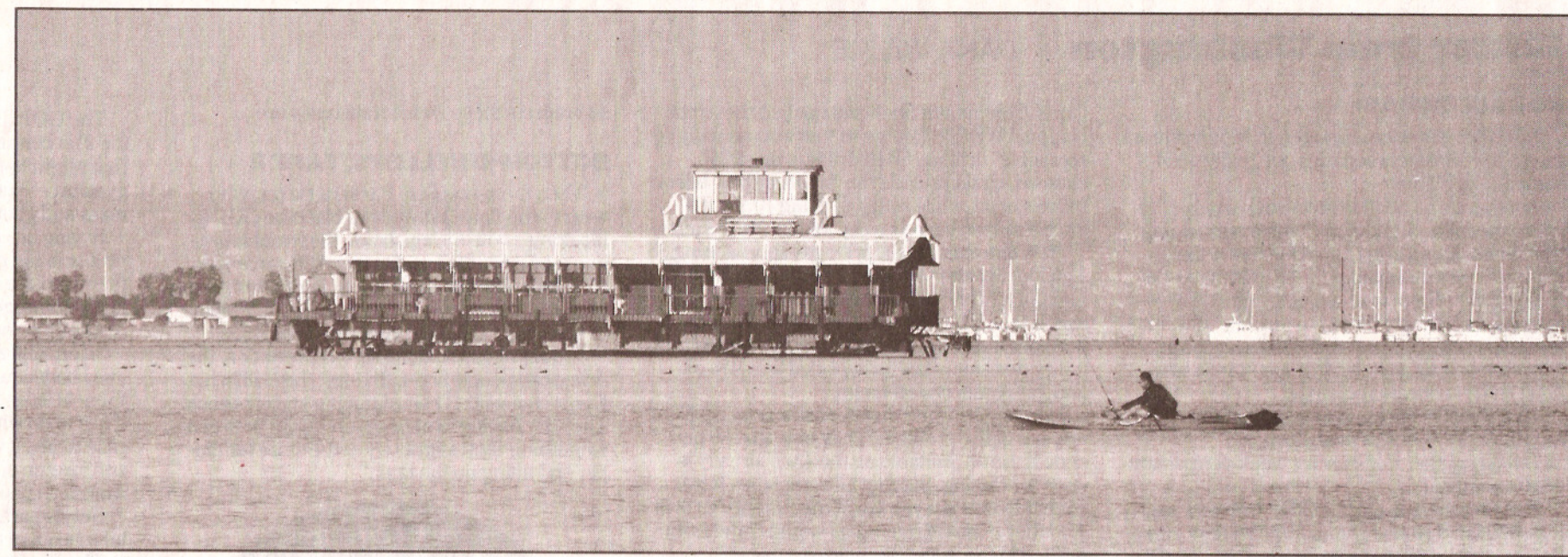
Neptune's Palace had been stuck in shallow water about 500 yards off the Chula Vista bayfront since a storm blew it off its moorings in January 2003. It was within view of land the Port hopes to develop in the next decade with a hotel and convention center, in partnership with Tennessee-based Gaylord Entertainment.

Port spokeswoman Marguerite Elicone said that environmental issues — the size of the boat and its location in an eelgrass habitat area — were factors that drove up the removal cost. Small fish spawning in the eelgrass beds are food for various species, including the least tern, an endangered bird.

Todd Roberts, vice president of Marine Group Boat Works, said removing Neptune's Palace required 10 days of planning.

Crews worked the vessel free from the marine floor, attached flotation devices and used tugboats to haul the boat near the boatyard, Roberts said. Guided by divers, a massive crane lifted it out on slings and positioned it on concrete blocks. The vessel weighed 1.3 million pounds, he said.

"We had an extremely diffi-



Neptune's Palace, an old disco party boat, was pushed into an environmentally sensitive area of south San Diego Bay in January 2003. John Gastaldo / Union-Tribune

cult time getting it into position," Roberts said. "When we lifted it, (the metal underside) started to crumble. It folded up like a big tin can."

Ultimately, "all our planning paid off," he said. The boat is now being dismantled at the company's Chula Vista boatyard.

In 2002, the Port District spent about \$35,000 to impound and destroy another party boat, the Castle, which had been floating off the National City pier in a free anchorage site called A-8.

The Port then began systematically removing abandoned boats from the bay about four years ago. From 2004 to 2007, the Port spent \$1.15 million on contracts with Marine Group Boat Works to remove 590 boats, including 12 that had sunk. The boats were impounded and returned to their own-

ers, auctioned off or demolished.

The Port District budgeted an additional \$180,000 for general boat removal, not including the special contract for Neptune's Palace, in the current fiscal year ending June 30.

Neptune's Palace was built about 1985 and was owned by Jim Morgan, a party-boat entrepreneur with a stake in Les Girls, a strip club in San Diego's Midway District. Morgan also owned the Castle party boat.

The three-story Neptune's Palace was decked out with shag carpet, disco balls, hot tubs and an underwater dance floor with observation windows. Like the Castle, it lacked an engine, so Morgan kept it anchored at various spots in the bay, with party guests brought out by ferry.

The party boat's heyday was in the late 1980s.

Morgan began living onboard Neptune's Palace in the 1990s, keeping it in the A-8 anchorage, as the Port began a legal battle to force him to move the vessel.

He fought efforts to seize the boat and in 2002 donated it to a pastor for the Mindbridge Church of the Open Mind on Logan Avenue in San Diego. The church held events, including youth socials, onboard.

Then a storm in 2003 pushed the boat from the A-8 anchorage to the spot 500 yards off Chula Vista. With its right to anchor in the bay in dispute, the vessel couldn't be moved.

The pastor, James Ward, also refused to remove the boat from the bay, defying the Port's order.

Ward's attorney, Gregory Garrison, has said that Ward used the boat for church services, weddings and youth

events. Garrison said Morgan donated the boat to the church because he believed low-income and minority people lacked access to the bay.

Ward sued the Port District in federal court, saying Port restrictions on anchoring were designed to discriminate against black church members who used Morgan's boats.

The Port District responded with a counterclaim to force Ward to remove the boat.

A federal judge ruled in January 2007 to uphold the Port's anchoring regulations. That ruling allowed the Port to take possession of Neptune's Palace to settle with Ward.

Ward is appealing the discrimination case to the 9th U.S. Circuit Court of Appeals.

OVERVIEW

Background: In January 2003, a storm blew the old Neptune's Palace party boat into an environmentally sensitive area of south San Diego Bay. After the Port District ordered its removal, the owner sued, claiming his civil rights were being violated.

What's changing: In 2007, a federal court ruled in favor of the Port District, finding that its rules weren't discriminatory. The Port District then obtained title to the vessel in a settlement and hired a contractor to remove it at a cost of \$313,000.

The future: Neptune's Palace was moved June 2 to a boatyard in Chula Vista. The contractor, Marine Group Boat Works, is now checking the wreck for hazardous materials, after which it will be dismantled and destroyed.

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