

A federal bill that would designate offshore rocks and small islands off the coast of Laguna Beach, Newport Beach and Dana Point as part of the California Coastal National Monument won approval in the House of Representatives by a vote of 397-4 last week.

The bill, HR 86, still needs Senate approval and was initiated and introduced for the second time by Rep. John Campbell, an Irvine Republican, at the urging of the Laguna Ocean Foundation, according to staff aide Brent Hall.

If the bill succeeds it will add the rocks off Laguna to the existing monument comprised of 20,000 small islands, rocks, exposed reefs and pinnacles spanning 1,100 miles between Mexico and Oregon, according to the website of the Interior Department's Bureau of Land Management, which oversees management of national monuments. Federal authority would extend the monument's protections above the mean high tide line.

In a statement announcing the House vote, Campbell said, "This legislation is long overdue. Thankfully, these rocks never had to be used for their intended civil defense purpose, but now 74 years later, it is important that they are preserved so that their aesthetic and ecological qualities are maintained."

Beth Krom, a former Irvine mayor who intends to challenge Campbell next November, said her opponent is trying to burnish his environmental credentials even before the bill becomes law. "For years he has done nothing for the environment, shown disregard for the coastline, he has not been available to help get funding in Newport with dredging the Back Bay, and he has an opponent who has a strong environmental record, so he's trying to build a record."

If the rocks gain the new designation, Laguna Beach could become a "gateway" to the California Coastal National Monument. There are currently five gateways, areas promoted by the BLM as prime locations to experience the national monument. The original plans included 12, but, according to CCNM Director Rick Hanks, "It did not include Laguna Beach. We were considering that when we did our scoping but those rocks were not in the monument...If this legislation is passed, we'd love to work with Laguna Beach on a gateway initiative."

Former Mayor Kelly Boyd, who was unaware of the issue until last week, said, "I can't see it really changing anything. Laguna's already a destination town anyway and I can't see that making that big a difference."

In another development affecting Laguna's coastline, five final proposals for marine protected areas along Southern California's coastline were presented last Wednesday to another higher-level panel, the state Fish and Game Commission. Boyd, the only City Council member to oppose support for establishing a city-wide marine reserve, was present. So were Toni Iseman, the council member who spearheaded the effort, Council member Verna Rollinger, numerous Laguna residents including students.

The preferred alternative devised by a panel of experts, three other proposals developed by various ocean-using constituent panels, and a fifth option of keeping existing protections as they are, have been forwarded to Fish and Game Department staff for review. A final plan is expected late next year.

Protections under the state-regulated Marine Life Protection Act extend to below the mean high tide line and thus would not conflict should the local rocks become part of a national monument, according to Hall, Campbell's aide.

Agreeing is Ed Amanza, a board member of Laguna Ocean Foundation, who has worked with Campbell's office for two years to win passage of HR 86 through the House.

"I don't see any conflict here; I just see that there will be more helping hands working toward the general principles of conservation," Amanza said.

Amid the debate over imposing a fishing ban and city-wide marine reserve, the new rock designation could be seen as a victory for environmentalists and possibly boost eco-tourism.

It may help a threatened bird species, too. The black oystercatcher, a species identified by the U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service for priority conservation, may be breeding on the rocks covered in the HR 86 bill, based on a shorebird survey conducted by the Laguna Ocean Foundation and

partially funded by the BLM.

On a recent field trip of the Laguna coast, Hanks saw the importance of the rocks for other species as well. “Out on the second rock (at Seal Rock), it was loaded with sea lions. There aren’t very many of these rocks where they can haul out and rest away from humans. As boating and human use, and even homes being built on the shorelines increase, the sea lions are not going to haul out there. It was interesting to see these small rocks being used so extensively. Cormorants as well. They need to dry off their feathers. They don’t have oils like other birds, mainly so they can dive. They can actually drown. It makes these rocks very, very important.”

Gateways of the monument are loosely required to follow principles of geo-tourism, which include sustaining or enhancing the geographical character of a place, including its environment, culture, aesthetics, heritage and the well-being of its residents. Participation is voluntary and there is little in the way of oversight or enforcement.

“We would be working with the community and how they want to define it, how much help they want, how they want to venture into this,” said Hanks.

Amanza said the foundation is currently attempting to woo a California Senator to sponsor the bill. Until then, a date for a vote cannot be set.

The bill would transfer authority from the U.S. Coast Guard, which since 1935 had never exercised the right to use them as possible lighthouse points or for defense against submarine attacks during World War II.

Existing gateways include Palos Verdes Peninsula, Piedras Blancas – San Simeon, Pigeon Point, Point Arena, and Trinidad State Beach.