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Big wave machine — by the sea — rolling into El Segundo

Person surfing at the Palm Springs Surf Club. (David Fouts/For The Times)

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The coastal city of El Segundo is an unlikely location for a massive, new artificial surf park.

Other California surf parks with machine-powered wave pools are inland, far from natural waves in places like Palm Springs and Lemoore in the San Joaquin Valley.

This summer, an owner of one of those parks, Palm Springs Surf Club, bought 10 acres of land on a former aerospace campus in El Segundo. The location is near a bonanza of sports enterprises that have sprung up in recent years, including a Topgolf entertainment complex and the training facility and headquarters of the Los Angeles Chargers football team.

A company tied to billionaire Vinny Smith's Toba Capital paid $54 million for the site, said Colin O'Byrne, president of Inland Pacific Cos., the development partner of Toba Capital.

Smith, a tech mogul and surfer, and a major investor in the Palm Springs Surf Club, reportedly got involved after testing a wave prototype.

Surfers wait their turn at The Palm Springs Surf Club. (David Fouts/For The Times)

The El Segundo surf park, which has yet to be named, will hold about 5 million gallons of water in a 2.2-acre lagoon, O'Byrne said. He hopes to secure city approval to start work on the project, valued at $175 million, in about six months.

El Segundo is already a legit surfing town, known for its custom surfboard shapers and waves at El Segundo Beach Jetty.

"El Segundo has been a mecca for surf culture since the 1950s," City Councilman and surfer Drew Boyles said. "But frankly, the surf out front is consistently poor-to-fair and it's, like, absolutely crowded. So, this wave pool is going to be incredible."

Boyles likened the potential appeal of the surf park to Topgolf, which makes a point in its advertising of putting beginners at ease with swinging a club for fun while also appealing to experienced golfers.

"Topgolf basically lowered the barriers to entry for people to get into the game of golf," Boyles said. "Wave pools are doing the same thing, lowering the barrier to entry for people to get into surfing in a controlled, safe environment that's not as intimidating as the ocean, that's predictable and consistent."

Boyles, a real estate developer, is working on developing a surf park of his own in Phoenix.

O'Byrne, who has been learning to surf in Palm Springs, said the vibe in a man-made lagoon can be more pleasant than competing with other surfers at sea.

"You have the ability to have your own wave, and everybody's rooting for you to make your wave as opposed to getting yelled at in the lineup as a beginner or intermediate level surfer."

The wave pool at The Palm Springs Surf Club. (David Fouts/For The Times)

In Newport Beach, the city is considering approval of the Snug Harbor Surf Park Project, which would redevelop the center portion of the Newport Beach Golf Course with approximately five acres of surf lagoons. It would replace the driving range and downsize the course to 15 holes.

The centerpiece of a typical surf park is a large pool holding millions of gallons of water and a machine that can generate as many as 1,000 waves per hour. Developers also typically add restaurants, shops and other attractions to broaden the park's appeal.

DSRT Surf, expected to open in summer 2026 at the Desert Willow Golf Resort in the Coachella Valley, is set to offer pickleball courts, a swimming pool, yoga classes, a restaurant and a skate bowl. Future plans call for a 139-room hotel and 57 luxury villas.

Inland Pacific and Smith are also working on a 45-acre mixed-use development around a surf park in Oceanside valued at $275 million, O'Byrne said. It is to include shops and restaurants along with a hotel adjacent to a 2.5-acre lagoon.

In Las Vegas, the company acquired 66 acres of land on Las Vegas Boulevard just south of the airport for a surf-centric development.

Now that engineers have figured out how to create consistent waves in a controlled environment, there is potential demand for many more surf parks in the world, O'Byrne said.

"This has been attempted since the 1980s," OByrne said. "We're really at a point where the technology has advanced to be able to do these more economically and allow for more consistency and longer waves."

Vistors watch surfers from dry land at The Palm Springs Surf Club. (David Fouts/For The Times)