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Debate Continues Over Sharp Park Golf Course

By Ben Terrall

Last fall, Supervisor John Avalos introduced legislation to close Sharp Park Golf Course and shift management of the San Francisco-owned land to the National Park Service's Golden Gate National Recreation Area. The bill is expected to be considered by the San Francisco Board of Supervisor's Community Operations and Neighborhood Services Committee this month or next. "City recreation and park resources are already hugely strained, and the impacts are being felt in our neighborhood parks," said Meredith Thomas, Neighborhood Parks Council's executive director. "Partnership with the National Park Service at Sharp Park will address critical infrastructure and environmental issues without drawing against funds that support parks in San Francisco County." Under the legislation, Pacifica residents, who are currently granted San Francisco resident golf rates at Sharp Park, would pay San Francisco resident rates at all of the City's other five golf courses.

According to Brent Plater, executive director of the Wild Equity Institute, which supports the legislation, the bill would improve recreation and public access to the park, protect endangered wildlife and save taxpayers' money. Plater believes that San Francisco has enough golf courses, and that subsidizing golfers in Pacifica is an unwise drain on the City's over-extended budget. According to Plater, climate change-induced sea level rise will eventually flood the park, making golf impossible. "We've gotten unanimous support from the environmental community" for the legislation, said Plater.

A 2008 San Francisco Recreation and Parks Department (RPD)-funded study by Proconsulting found that of the City's golf courses only Harding Park operated above 50 percent capacity. Sharp Park operates at between 40 and 50 percent capacity, compared to an industry standard of around 60 percent. Public golf courses located in Alameda, Petaluma, San Jose, Livermore, and Oakland have recently been proposed for sale or closed. In late 2010, Adobe Creek Golf Course in Santa Rosa was closed due to declining demand. Earlier this year Governor Jerry Brown proposed the sale of Oakland's Montclair Golf Course because it "serves no state function and should be sold off to pay debt."

Four hundred acre Sharp Park is home to two federally-protected species, the California red-legged frog and San Francisco garter snake. Six conservation groups filed a lawsuit against RPD last spring to stop golf course activities that kill or harm the endangered frog and snake. According to Plater, "more frogs have been killed in the past winter" at the course. He explained that the golf course's pumping excess water from the park left frog eggs high and dry, killing them.

A peer-reviewed scientific study and restoration proposal for Sharp Park prepared by the Wild Equity Institute and Center for Biological Diversity and released last winter found that restoring the park's natural lagoon, wetlands and beach processes would be the least costly land use approach. According to the study, losses at Sharp Park from 2005 to 2009 totaled almost \$1 million. A June 2, 2010 SF Weekly article found that capital expenditures at Sharp Park Golf Course are likely to be double RPD's estimates.

"It makes fiscal sense for San Francisco to partner with the Park Service" on Sharp Park, said Peter Brastow, Nature in the City's director, since the federal agency has "broader-reaching fundraising capabilities." The Golden Gate National Parks Conservancy's ability to raise funds is "practically without precedent," said Brastow, while RPD's funding capacity is "more haphazard. Parks Conservancy is the 501c3 that is authorized by federal law as the official support and fundraising arm of the GGNRA. Both organizations are headquartered at Building 201 at Fort Mason, and so enjoy a seamless working relationship that goes back now several decades. The Conservancy raises millions and millions for the park [GGNRA] every year, with awesome access to wealthy San Franciscans and Bay Areas," Brastow said.

Sharp Park is within the Golden Gate National Recreation Area's boundary, and adjacent to the Park Service's Mori Point. According to Steve Krefting, board member and past president of the San Francisco League of Conservation Voters, treating Sharp Park and Mori Point as one area would benefit flora and fauna by connecting restored upland habitat at Mori Point to Sharp Park's wetland habitat. Krefting also believes that a trail-restoration project, which would occur if the land was turned over to the National Park Service for management, would open up the area to greater numbers of people.

Richard Harris, co-founder of the San Francisco Golf Alliance, pointed to the ethnically and demographically diverse population Sharp Park currently draws, many of whom are San Francisco residents who've been visiting the park for years. Harris is concerned that Avalos' ordinance would permit the City to terminate the golf course without an adequate environmental impact review under the California Environmental Quality Act (CEQA), which "would not be a good precedent for the City."

RPD asked the San Francisco Historic Preservation Commission to designate the golf course as an historic resource under CEQA. But last fall the commission declined to do so. Led by Commissioner Alan Martinez – who asserted that the existing golf

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course is "a fragment of what it once was" – the Commission unanimously voted that it did "...not concur on the integrity of the golf course," meaning that the course no longer contained the features that would make it historic.

"The mayor, the Board of Supervisors, as well as the Recreation and Park Commission all have directed the Recreation and Park Department to look into alternative solutions to restoring Sharp Park. So as a response, the Department has developed the Significant Natural Resource Area Management Plan. Now the plan is going through an environmental review process with the SF Planning Department," said Connie Chan, RPD's deputy director of public affairs. Plater asserted that the plan "wants to ensure golf continues at Sharp Park no matter what the costs, and the financial and environmental costs are substantial."

The Potrero Hill Democratic Club initially discussed Avalos' legislation last summer, tabling the issue to provide time to gather more information. Last fall longtime Hill resident and Sierra Club San Francisco Bay Chapter Chair Arthur Feinstein convinced the club – over Harris' objections – to endorse the legislation, by a vote of 11 to four.

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