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## Compromise sought over Sharp Park sea wall

By Julia Scott

[julia.scott@bayareanewsgroup.com](mailto:julia.scott@bayareanewsgroup.com)

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PACIFICA -- The battle over Sharp Park Golf Course is symbolized by the sea wall that keeps the ocean off the fairways.

On one side, environmental groups want the wall removed to re-establish a historic tidal lagoon; on the other, local residents fear the water's encroachment and say the sea wall should be made taller and stronger.

In the middle, San Francisco Recreation and Parks Department officials are trying to create a plan for the dirt sea wall that will boost the population of the endangered San Francisco garter snake, make residents happy and maintain 18 holes of golf in an area prone to serious floods.

Sharp Park exemplifies a conundrum facing many coastal cities: whether to accommodate sea-level rise by retreating from the ocean or protect development at all costs.

All sides agree the situation is untenable. Over the weekend, storms dumped several inches of rain on the public golf course. The storm water, trapped behind the sea wall, closed several holes.

A century ago, the water would simply have flowed out to the ocean instead of pooling near Laguna

Salada, the pond that marks the location of the historic lagoon. Now the golf course has to pump the water out, potentially stranding the eggs laid at high tide by threatened California red-legged frogs.

"Sharp Park's a wetland that they drained to play golf. They drain it regularly, and it's just not sustainable," said Brent Plater, an environmental advocate who

is leading the charge to replace the golf course with a nature preserve.

A report commissioned by the city of San Francisco in 2009 suggested that two-thirds of the 3,200-foot sea wall is not strong or high enough to resist the major storm surges that scientists say will become more frequent as sea levels rise.

But the city, which owns the golf course and the sea wall, has resisted adding to the limited piles of riprap at the northern and southern limits of Sharp Park. It hasn't built up the sea wall since 1989.

Today the top of the sea wall forms a coastal access trail popular with joggers and dog owners, part of a hiking trail that leads to Mori Point.

Last week, members of a Sharp Park task force comprised of officials from San Francisco and San Mateo counties concluded that no matter what happens, the city will not consider expanding or strengthening the sea wall ever again.

"Hardening the levee, building it bigger, is only going to work against us in the long run, and we need to figure out a way for a more natural system, like a barrier lagoon," said Lisa Wayne, a biologist and natural resources manager for the San Francisco Recreation and Parks Department.

That may not be what locals want to hear. Last

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month, Pacifica resident Paul Slavin delivered a petition to the Pacifica City Council bearing 190 signatures from residents who live within a quarter-mile of the sea wall. Residents asked the council to get San Francisco to expedite repairs on the sea wall.

Rep. Jackie Speier, D-Hillsborough, requested federal funding for a sea-wall study last year, without success.

Slavin walks his dog along the sea wall every day. On Wednesday, he pointed to a gully in the wall that tides had worn away.

"This is what happens when the ocean gets in," he said, shaking his head.

San Francisco officials say they will never remove the sea wall outright or do anything that would harm private property. They have vowed to work closely with San Mateo County and the National Park Service, rather than make any unilateral decisions.

Wayne said the city will need experts to advise them on how to design a "fail-safe" system that could restore tidal flows to the western edge of Sharp Park but maintain control over them.

She admitted it would be difficult and likely costly. "There's not a lot precedent for it," she said.

A report released this month by two environmental groups outlines a 60-year plan that would allow the ocean to gradually erode the sea wall and form a larger lagoon. The wetlands would act as a natural barrier to storm surges. Behind the wetlands, the group proposes constructing series of berms that would keep houses from being inundated.

The plan calls for replacing the golf course with a nature preserve, something San Francisco officials

oppose. They face a potential lawsuit over it from Plater's group, the Wild Equity Institute.

"If the city suggests that they can keep 18 holes of golf while they do restoration, that's highly unlikely. There doesn't seem to be a way for those two things to coexist," Plater said.

The city disagrees and will release a draft environmental report of its own, outlining natural restoration options for Sharp Park, in late 2011 or early 2012.

Contact Julia Scott at 650-348-4340.

- Environmentalists want the wall removed to re-establish a historic tidal lagoon.
- Residents want the wall taller and stronger to withstand the threat of flooding.

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