

TO: Phil Ginsburg, General Manager of San Francisco Recreation and Parks Department
FROM: UC Berkeley Students
DATE: 25 April 2010
SUBJECT: Sharp Park Action Plan

1. Action Statement

The San Francisco Recreation and Parks Department should shut down Sharp Park Golf Course and revert the land to federal ownership and management, under the direction of the GGNRA (Golden Gate National Recreation Area). The land should then be restored to its natural state to satisfy recreational and educational demand as well as to address environmental concerns. This will ensure the land benefits the most people and will relieve the financial burden of Sharp Park Golf Course on San Francisco taxpayers.

2. Background

Sharp Park Golf Course's current policy for managing the San Francisco garter snake and the California red-legged frog is inadequate. The problem arises due to the fact that these two animals are threatened annually by the maintenance and geographic layout of the golf course. The man-modified lagoon on the golf course is breeding ground for the frog and insufficient in size to hold winter storm water. This causes flooding onto the fairways and greens annually. The golf course counters flooding by using pumps that threaten the frog eggs and tadpoles. Since the garter snake relies on the frogs as a primary food source the reduction in the number of frogs means a reduction in the number of snakes. In addition, there have been incidents of the snakes being killed by equipment used to maintain the golf course. Wild Equity has threatened to take legal action against the golf course as a result of these issues.

3. Issues

- **Economic**

The Sharp Park golf course is not currently financially self-sustaining and loses thousands of dollars every year. It will require millions more of taxpayer dollars for renovation with no guarantee that it could become profitable to the city of San Francisco.

- **Environment & Endangered Species**

Flooding, wetland habitat loss, fertilizer runoff and rising sea levels that put Sharp Park and surrounding communities at risk are environmental issues currently facing the Sharp Park golf course. In addition, the endangered San Francisco garter snake and the threatened California red-legged frog are at risk of becoming extinct because of an unsustainable habitat located on the park grounds.

- **Social**

The golfers who currently use the Sharp Park course and future recreational users both have a stake in the course turning into a natural park and wetland.

4. Recommendations & Rationale

- **Economic**

Contrary to the claims made by Sharp Park's management that the golf course is very profitable, it has paled in comparison to the profit of other SF golf courses. The golf course lost an estimated \$30,000 - \$300,000 between 2004 and 2008 and future projections show a deficit for the 2009-2010 fiscal year (Appendix G). Sharp Park is appreciated for its low prices; however, with the current economic conditions, the prices will not be able to remain as low. The burden that this park will place on the golf fund will detract from the resources that could be used towards some of San Francisco's better golf courses. In addition, in order to redevelop the course in the hopes of making it profitable, San Francisco's Recreation and Parks Department proposes spending \$12-14 million when it still has loans from other projects that it has yet to repay. These costs do not cover the proposed \$7 million water cleaning project and the additional maintenance of the sea wall (Appendix G, GGAS). The golf course is not currently self-sustaining and requires a large subsidy at the expense of San Francisco taxpayers. Furthermore, the golf course has not provided measurable economic benefits to the Pacifica community. If Sharp Park continues as a golf course and does not provide a suitable habitat for the recovery of the San Francisco garter snake and the red-legged frog, it will incur more fees from legal action taken by the federal government and concerned citizens (Appendix G, GGAS).

The San Francisco Recreation and Parks Department should restore the park to its natural wetland state and create a recreation/ visitor's center so many can partake in the numerous activities this natural space will provide. The results from a 2008 survey taken by San Franciscans showed that golf ranked 16 out of 19 in recreation priorities (Appendix G, GGAS). Rather than focus on a small part of the community who plays golf, a natural environment will benefit a much larger constituency with opportunities for hiking, biking, camping, and other outdoor activities (Appendix C). National parks around the country bring in average revenue of \$70 per visitor (Appendix G). This will greatly benefit the surrounding Pacifica community. In addition, if the area were allowed to revert to its natural landscape, it would require much less money to maintain and would not be a burden to the city of San Francisco and its residents. The federal government will offer funding if Sharp Park is restored to its natural wetlands state.

- **Environment & Endangered Species**

The poor design and placement of Sharp Park have resulted in numerous environmental concerns. The threats of sea-level rise, global climate change, and coastal flooding all suggest that Sharp Park should be restored to its original wetland state.

Restoration will allow for natural flood control as well as ample carbon fixing. As wetlands absorb freshwater runoff and buffer surrounding communities from coastal storm wave energy, they reduce flood risk (Appendix G). In addition to the connection with Mori Point, restoration of Sanchez Creek for its entire reach upland into the watershed would provide greater access to the moist riparian corridor (Appendix D). Preventing further fragmentation of the wetland would not only grant necessary habitat to endangered species, but would also increase the environment's capability to store and regulate water.

Current flood control structures are located along the crest of a barrier beach, where storm erosion risk is highest and the sand barrier is most prone to failure. If these man-made barriers are penetrated, Sharp Park and surrounding communities are at risk. In response to rising sea levels, Laguna Salada beach will inevitably shift landward, providing a natural flood control solution that requires little human involvement and thus, the lowest cost (Appendix G). Normal

winter rains have caused the course to flood nearly every year, relaying fertilizer runoff into Laguna Salada. As a result of these increased nutrient inputs, the tules have grown rampant in the lagoon ("Dredging" 1). They do not provide adequate habitat for endangered species and decrease the space available for native aquatic plants.

The endangered San Francisco garter snake and the threatened California red-legged frog need a sustainable habitat, which Sharp Park does not provide. The frogs lay their eggs in the part of the golf course that floods yearly during the rainy season. The golf course needs to pump the water out to keep their course open, but by doing so, the frog eggs become trapped on tulle reeds and desiccate. As a result, only a small population of frog eggs will be able to reach adulthood and reproduce again. A smaller frog population directly harms the garter snakes that feed on this specific type of frog. In order to stop this population culling cycle, the pumps need to be shut off and the park should be restored for the benefit of these species.

The current pattern of persistent and devastating disruptions is not conducive to the frogs' breeding and their numbers will continue to dwindle because of low reproduction rates. As the snakes' food sources decrease, so too will their population. The natural park will mitigate these effects by providing the ideal habitat for both species to survive and thrive. The golf course claims that dredging will alleviate the frog's breeding problems; however, it is only a short-term solution that does not provide long-term benefits for the frogs and does not address the issues of high nutrient load and specific water depths for breeding (Appendix A).

-Social

The Sharp Park Golf Course serves a very small community of golfers. The course received failing grades in a recent golfer survey in overall course conditions, on-course services, amenities, overall experience, and many other factors (Appendix D, slide 41). Since 2000, the number of rounds played at the Sharp Park Golf Course has fallen by 38 percent (Appendix D, slide 37). While interest in golf is declining, public interest in outdoor education, hiking, and exploration of our national parks is increasing. According to a study of recreation preferences in San Francisco, the need for more walking, biking, and hiking trails far exceeds that for golf courses (Appendix D, slide 50). Restoring Sharp Park would provide more recreational areas for public use and would expand educational opportunities. The needs of future recreational users exceed those of the current golfers.

5. Next Steps/ Implementation

It is recommended that San Francisco Recreation and Parks Department shut down Sharp Park. After its closure, the GGNRA should take over the project and start implementing restoration. The National Park Service would provide technical wetland habitat restoration recommendations to the City to increase the compatibility with Mori Point's habitat (Appendix G). Locals can involve themselves in the restoration effort through stewardship programs; they might build and maintain trails, restore native plant species to the Park, or monitor environmental quality (Appendix G). Within 5 years, the Park will be open to visitors, local and non-local alike, aligning itself with GGNRA's vision of bringing national parks closer to people's backyards. Flood protection barriers would be built on a case-by-case basis with special attention given to sustainable, viable and secure areas. Areas near roads, homes, and other infrastructural components will have priority (Appendix G).

6. Appendix

Appendix A: Interview 1- Brent Plater, *Executive Director*, Wild Equity Institute

Brent Plater is the Executive Director of the Wild Equity Institute and a large advocate for the restoration of Sharp Park. Making note of the great financial losses to the City of San Francisco and detrimental effects to the California Red-legged frog and the San Francisco Garter snake, Plater claims that Sharp Park Golf Course preservationists are creating a political battle that continues to harm the ecological state of the area. Plater indicates that in the long run restoration efforts would cost much less than the continual maintenance costs used by the artificial environment created by the Sharp Park Golf Course.

Appendix B: Interview 2- Kevin Ramsay, *Board of Directors and Head Chef*, Sharp Park Golf Course

Kevin Ramsay is one of the Board of Directors and Head Chef of the Sharp Park Golf Course and is urging folks to maintain the park as it is in servicing the golf community in Pacifica. In his interview Ramsay mentions many of the other organizations that attempted to restore the park; however, he claims that restoration efforts would be far more costly and harmful to the threatened and endangered species. Ramsay argues that the harmed species need fresh water, and that restoration would bring about salt water, which restoration group's state is not true. Additionally, in the interview Ramsay also states that preserving the golf course would bring in revenue to support itself, which other organizations claim is not happening.

Appendix C: Interview 3- Mike Lynes, *Conservation Director and General Counsel*, Environmental Matters, Golden Gate Audubon Society

Mike Lynes is the Conservation Director and General Counsel of the Golden Gate Audubon Society and is an advocate for restoration efforts for Sharp Park. He argues that the California Red-legged frog and the San Francisco Garter snake need their environments restored and that folks need to get involved. Lynes also responded to how his organization is and will continue to be involved and made a large point about how it is also important to consider all the other key players (City of San Francisco Parks and Recreation Dept.) and how they can influence progress in the debate. Essentially, these species need habitats and restoration is key in these efforts.

Appendix D: Public Meeting- Nature in the City: Golf Courses, Parks, Natural Areas, *CounterPULSE*, San Francisco, CA

The Wild Equity Institute presented on the current debate around the Sharp Park golf course. Advocating for restoration efforts, the meeting addressed economic, social and environmental issues that make preserving the golf course problematic. Utilizing a PowerPoint presentation, presenters made a well-developed argument as to why it is important to restore the park, but at the same time develop a space for recreation and education opportunities. Essentially, this restoration would contribute far more to the city of Pacifica than the current golf course that has for years lacked proper revenue to sustain it.

Appendix E: Chart Set 1- Fiscal Year 2004-2008, City of San Francisco Golf Course Expenses

This set of charts, “Fiscal Year 2004-2008,” provided by the City of San Francisco display expenses and revenue brought in by each city governed gold course. From these charts it is indicative that the Sharp Park Golf Course is not making enough revenue to sustain it self. This trend is seen through out several fiscal years.

Appendix F: Chart Set 2- Fiscal Year 2010-2011 Budget, City of San Francisco Recreation and Park Department

This set of charts, “Fiscal Year 2010-2011 Budget,” further indicates that for this upcoming year the park will continue to result in a deficit. The expenditures continue to exceed revenue. This set of charts gives a simple breakdown of the City of San Francisco’s Golf Fund.

Appendix G: Public Hearing Official Packet- City of San Francisco Sharp Park Hearing, Wild Equity Institute

In this public hearing office packet gathered by the Wild Equity Institute, the main economic and environmental issues affecting Sharp Park are outlined as well as a rationale as to why restoration is key. Prepared for a public hearing regarding the Sharp Park and the City of San Francisco, letters from various organizations were gathered in support of restoration efforts. Brent Plater the Executive Director of the Wild Equity Institute compiled this packet.

Appendix H: Dredging in Sharp Park, Brent Plater, Wild Equity Institute

Brent Plater from Wild Equity explores the idea around dredging as a possible solution to mitigate some of the environmental issues affecting Sharp Park. Dredging is a short-term solution that ignores the long-term threats to Sharp Park. He indicates that folks trying to preserve the golf course want to distance the golf course from the high water level by dredging the bottom of the lagoon and raising the height of the fairways.