

Time for smart planning for future of Sharp Park

By Stan Seavin *Pacifica Tribune* guest Columnist *San Jose Mercury News*

Posted:

MercuryNews.com

MercuryNews.com

I have been a longtime resident of Pacifica and have seen our local government and community grapple with projects where the public interest is at stake. We've done some great work, as seen in the development of Mori Point from a neglected and abused coastal promontory to a treasured addition to the Golden Gate National Recreation Area. This section of our local national park is now a refuge for federally protected species, including the California red-legged frog and the San Francisco garter snake, and a place for taking a hike with friends and family to the bluff for stunning views. We can be proud to pass this on to the next generation.

When the public interest is being promoted, the response is noticeable and positive. In 2010 alone at Mori Point, more than 1,700 people volunteered (65 percent youth), 21 acres of vital habitat was restored, and students at Pacifica's Oceana High School grew more than 10,000 plants.

But adjacent to Mori Point to the north at the City of San Francisco-owned Sharp Park Golf Course, we are witnessing a debacle in coastal planning and a short-sightedness in vision. It is no wonder we are bogged down in conflict and lawsuits: those making the decisions are making an end-run around the public interest. Here are a few things at stake, not small potatoes by any means.

Our beach. Will we make planning choices that ensure we still have a beach? The Sharp Park beach continues to face threats from plans to substantially increase financial and infrastructure investment at the below-sea-level golf course. We aren't talking about investing a few hundred thousand dollars. We are talking about millions. As a result, these coastal developers will inevitably turn to increased armoring of the already failing seawall berm when we see increased storm surges and sea-level rise. The science is well developed and clear on seawall-beach dynamics: a seawall will erode the beach until there is nothing. This is a Pacifica shoreline planning disease that can actually be avoided at Sharp Park, but not when millions of dollars of investment are at stake for golf course developers. On the contrary, restoring Sharp Park wetlands enables the beach to be saved and spared from destructive armoring that's inevitable with promoting continued golf use of the site.

Our wetlands. Will we make planning choices that provide protection to nearby neighborhoods? Here the science is also clear. The recovery of wetlands provide buffers to storm surges and the increasing impacts of them vis-à-vis sea level rise. Neighborhoods adjacent to the Sharp Park golf course benefit more from wetlands protection than continued artificial development.

Endangered species. Will we make planning choices that see these species move from endangered to extensive rather than to extinct? The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service recently concluded that the California red-legged frog and San Francisco garter snake would be killed by golf course operations. I believe in helping save imperiled wildlife for future generations to enjoy and so this a big deal. For the frog, which lays its egg masses in the pond that the golf course operators pump when then feel too much water impacts their course conditions, the next generation's population is depleted every time the masses are left to dry due to said pumping. For the extremely rare snake, whose population is unknown in the region but could be as low as a handful, one snake being killed by golf course lawn mower blades presents a major setback to the stability of the population.

Sometimes our elected officials, or golf course developers, can't see the forest for the trees. What makes sense about investing millions of dollars into a course that will come at the expense of our beach, our wetlands, and endangered wildlife?

Contrary to Paul Slavin and his recent column filled with ad hominem attacks on environmental non-profits and attorney Brent Plater, the only infusion of long-term sustainable planning and thinking has come from these groups and Mr. Plater specifically.

Mr. Plater's credibility and public service on public interest and conservation matters is difficult to question, and it is why the San Francisco's Board of Supervisors provided him a certificate of honor, San Francisco Tomorrow named him an Unsung Hero, and the California State Senate and Assembly recognized his work with certificates of recognition.

It's well past time Sharp Park golf course advocates realize the overwhelming short-term and long-term public interest issues at stake. Similarly, it's well past time public agencies such as the City of San Francisco and the County of San Mateo put an end to irrational digressions and short-term thinking. Let's start planning smartly so we can be proud of what we pass on to the future.