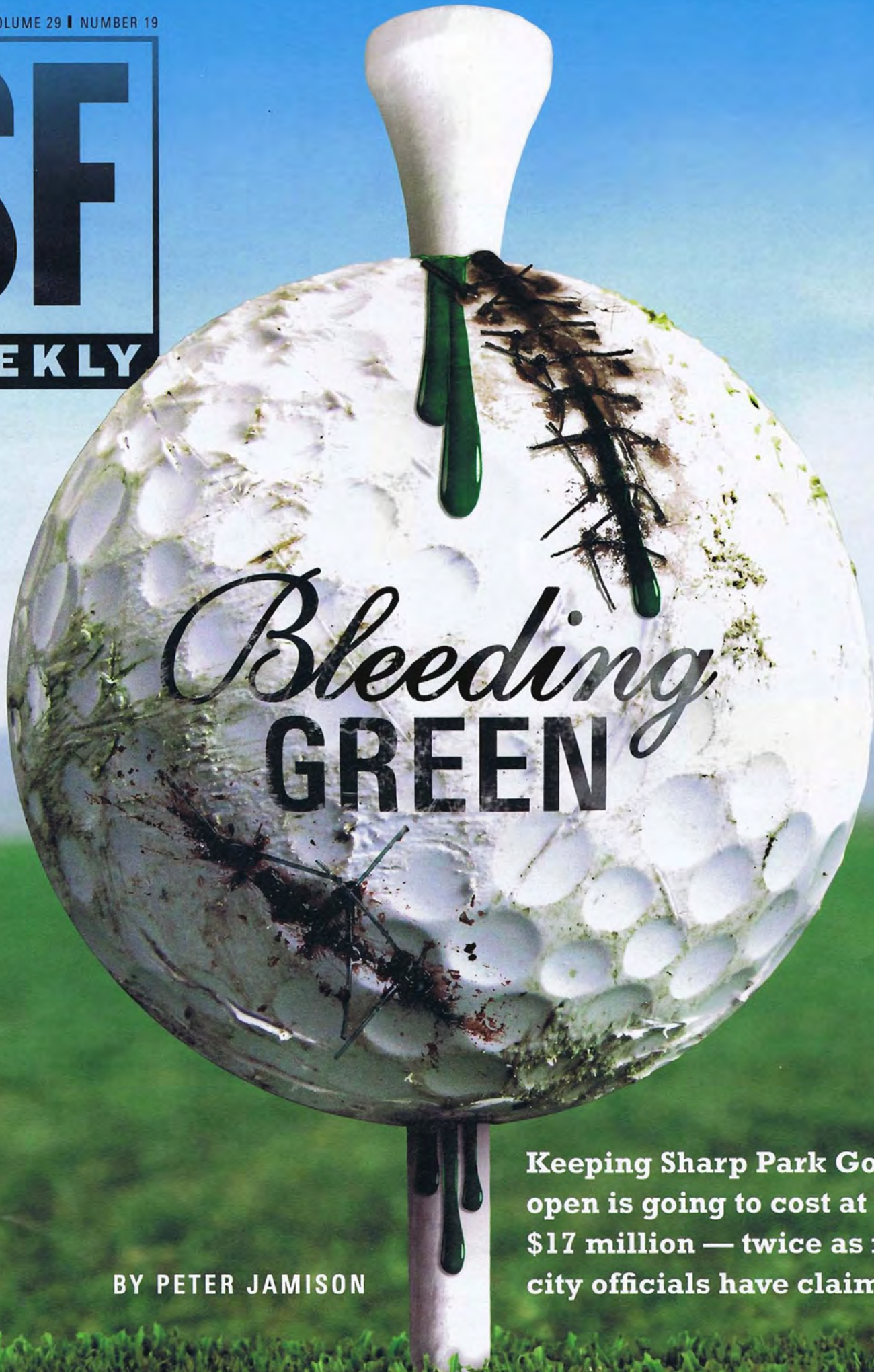


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Bleeding
GREEN

BY PETER JAMISON

Keeping Sharp Park Golf Course open is going to cost at least \$17 million — twice as much as city officials have claimed.

Bleeding Green

Forget about Sharp Park's endangered frogs and snakes. The real problem with the golf course is its enormous cost to the city.

By Peter Jamison

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Frank Gaglione



Marc Neilson says Sharp Park is one of the last affordable golf courses in the Bay Area.

Frank Gaglione



Pacifica's Ralph Hill plays regularly at Sharp Park.

Frank Gaglione



San Francisco golfer Robert "Bo" Links says Sharp Park, designed by famed architect Alister MacKenzie, is a masterpiece of course design.

On a recent Wednesday afternoon, San Francisco resident Marc Neilson walks after his tee shot between rows of dark cypress trees lining the 400-yard, dogleg-right fairway of the 11th hole at Sharp Park Golf Course in Pacifica. It's overcast, and the wind carries the smell of the sea over a nearby berm that divides Sharp Park from the Pacific shoreline. This 78-year-old municipal course has been dubbed the poor man's Pebble Beach, and — were it not for its relative lack of crowds and poorly mowed greens — it could almost resemble the world-class links 120 miles to the south.

There's something else that separates Sharp Park from its more august counterparts: the golfers. The success of such stars as Tiger Woods and Vijay Singh notwithstanding, many people continue to view golf courses as the province of the rich and white. At Sharp Park, many players are neither. Neilson, who sports a deep tan and a lank mane of silver hair, is a semiretired bookkeeper who plays in a blues band. His companions include a retired Oakland International Airport manager and a construction foreman. The airport manager, Pacifica resident Ralph Hill, is black. "It's really rare for me to come out here and play an all-white foursome," Neilson says, stopping to talk with a reporter. Sharp Park, he adds, is "the last affordable seaside golf in California. Everything else is \$75, \$100, and up." At Sharp Park, by contrast, a San Francisco resident gets a midweek round for just \$20; a nonresident pays \$31.

Sharp Park Golf Course, in other words, is remarkably affordable to those who play it. To the city of San Francisco, which owns the course and is responsible for its management and upkeep, it is anything but.

In recent years, the course has been at the center of a roiling environmental debate that has pitted golfers and golf advocates against activists who want to see the course bulldozed and restored to wilderness. The unwitting instigators of this battle have been two creatures that call Sharp Park home: the San Francisco garter snake and the California red-legged frog. Both are protected under the federal Endangered Species Act, and environmentalists have gathered evidence that both have been harmed by careless maintenance operations — lawn-

Frank Gaglione



An earth-and-rock seawall divides the Pacifica shoreline from Sharp Park Golf Course.

Frank Gaglione



Wetlands at Sharp Park are home to rare species of frog and snake.

Victor Abbley



The San Francisco garter snake found at Sharp Park is protected under the Endangered Species Act.

Frank Gaglione



The California red-legged frog requires a natural freshwater habitat, like the one at Sharp Park.

Frank Gaglione



Supervisor Ross Mirkarimi says past estimates of the full cost of keeping Sharp Park open were "very incomplete."

Subject(s):

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mowing, flood control — at the course.

In December, the San Francisco Recreation and Park Commission approved an apparent compromise when it adopted a plan that calls for keeping 18 holes of golf at Sharp Park while realigning parts of the course to create more habitat for the frog and snake. Rec and Park general manager Phil Ginsburg triumphantly announced in a Nov. 6 letter to city officials that the endangered species "can not only survive, but also flourish at Sharp Park" without impinging on the activities of golfers. This solution appeased golf advocates even as it frustrated environmental activists, and its wisdom, from the perspective of species conservation, is still in dispute.

However, one of the most important consequences of keeping Sharp Park operating — the financial burden it poses to San Francisco and its taxpayers — wasn't fully explained. According to government records and interviews with officials in San Francisco and San Mateo County, the total minimum investment Sharp Park requires will range from at least \$17 million to \$23.4 million or higher — roughly twice as much as Rec and Park officials acknowledged in their report. It's a staggering amount, exceeding even the cost of the landmark 2003 renovation of San Francisco's Harding Park, a premier public golf course that last year hosted the prestigious Presidents Cup tournament.

In a time when depleted government coffers are forcing the park department to consider slashing basic services — and when the city as a whole faces a \$483 million budget shortfall — is Sharp Park worth it? That depends on whom you ask, but some surprisingly prominent voices have singled it out as a waste of money. In December, \$2 million in grants devoted to improving the course's water system was highlighted in a report by Republican Senators John McCain (Ariz.) and Tom Coburn (Okla.) on misallocated federal stimulus funds. ("Water Pipeline to a Money-Losing Golf Course," the headline read over the entry.)

Outside funding sources, from the federal government or from public agencies in San Mateo County, might eventually become available to defray the full cost of preserving cheap municipal golf at Sharp Park. To date, however, such income streams have not materialized, and some think San Francisco residents remain uninformed about the full fiscal burden the golf course poses.

"That [Recreation and Park Department] report, even though it was a good first step, it was very incomplete, in my estimation," says Supervisor Ross Mirkarimi, who has sought to draw attention to the financial realities involved in keeping Sharp Park open. "It did not give a full estimate — not only of the upfront costs, but of the long-term capital costs. People shouldn't be fearful of that discussion."

For several reasons, however, the discussion is a complicated one, involving multiple layers of state and federal government regulations and a hotly contested body of scientific evidence on the fate of Sharp Park's nonhuman inhabitants.

Some believe the city's best course of action is to turn the entire property over to the National Park Service, incorporating it in the Golden Gate National Recreation Area; in theory, this option

could cost San Francisco taxpayers virtually nothing, since restoration costs would be borne by the federal government. Others think it's time for residents of Pacifica and surrounding San Mateo towns to start pitching in for its upkeep. And, in one particularly interesting twist, at least one scientific expert believes that golf, however much it is reviled by some environmental activists, must be preserved for its ecological benefits — that it is now essential for the survival of the San Francisco garter snake and California red-legged frog.

Questions about this property's future are nothing new. Since it was completed in 1932, Sharp Park has existed, quite literally, in defiance of conditions inhospitable to golf. The holes were designed by renowned British army-surgeon-turned-golf-course-architect Alister MacKenzie, who, after his immigration to the U.S. in the 1920s, made his name by creating such courses as Augusta National in Georgia and Cypress Point in Pebble Beach. At Sharp Park, he intended his design to mimic the natural contours of the shoreline, with some holes laid almost directly along the sea.

It didn't work out so well. In the 1930s, coastal storms washed away the seaside holes and flooded the inland portions of the course. In the 1940s, a massive earthen seawall was constructed to keep Sharp Park dry, but this new level of protection came at a cost: Some of MacKenzie's most picturesque holes were rerouted or destroyed, and the resulting layout — the one that greets golfers today — has been judged inferior by some golf-architecture buffs. In his 2000 book, *The Missing Links: America's Greatest Lost Golf Courses and Holes*, author Daniel Wexler described the contemporary Sharp as a "vastly altered layout serving mostly to make one wonder if a vintage MacKenzie design ever *could* have existed upon this site."

Sharp Park has nevertheless become a beloved feature of the Bay Area's recreational landscape over the past 60 years, particularly among the working-class and middle-class golfers who have seen other public courses — including Harding Park, where a nonresident must now shell out \$135 for a weekday golf round — turn prohibitively expensive. "It's not just a golf course," says San Mateo resident Stephanie Singer, a regular at Sharp Park who says her mother played the course every Friday for 55 years. "It's our course."

San Francisco resident Robert "Bo" Links, a golfer, lawyer, and amateur golf-course architect who advocates preserving the course in the face of environmental concerns, says that a significant portion of MacKenzie's original design is intact. (According to Greg Ritschy, head pro at Sharp Park, there remain 11 holes that conform to the course's 1932 layout.) "San Francisco has an unbelievable number of golf assets. They're phenomenal properties," Links says. "Sharp is in many ways the most historical of all of them, because of Alister MacKenzie. It's the equivalent of having Michelangelo come in to sculpt *David*."

Even a cursory tour of Sharp Park reveals that there's something to this way of thinking. Seawall or no, the golf course's beachside setting, elegant cypresses, thickets of marsh reeds, and scenic backdrop of coastal mountains distinguish it from the yellowing fairways and chain-link fences that characterize many municipal courses. The problem is that those with an eye for these particulars — and with a taste for golf in general — have fallen to a fairly small minority in San Francisco.

A city-commissioned 2004 survey by PROS Consulting revealed that golf was near the bottom on a list of San Franciscans' recreational priorities. Only 24 percent professed a need for golf courses, making golf the fourth least-popular activity at city facilities; only baseball, softball, and skateboarding rated worse. (At the top of the list were walking trails, biking trails, pools, and community gardens.)

"Nobody in San Francisco cares about Sharp Park," says environmentalist Brent Plater, executive director of the nonprofit Wild Equity Institute, who has spearheaded the campaign to close the course. "If that golf course were to fall into the ocean tomorrow, nobody would blink an eye."

Plater believes that golf advocates are a tiny but resourceful special-interest group within the city, and have managed to forestall what should be an obvious choice. Closing the golf course and turning it into an outdoor recreation and wildlife area, he says, is a rational decision that will satisfy the greatest number of people. "If Spock were in charge of these things, or the social insects, who deal with these collective problems a little bit better than we do, there's no doubt" that Sharp Park would be shut down, he says.

As a public-relations tool, the image of an insect colony usurping administration of the Sharp Park golf course isn't a strong selling point for restoration plans. But two other types of critter have proven far more effective in rallying environmentalists: the California red-legged frog and the San Francisco garter snake. The frog — an underwhelming mud-colored creature that has been successfully invoked to halt development up and down the state — is in a less precarious position than its serpentine predator, the striking, red-banded garter snake, which has been designated an endangered species for more than 40 years and lives only in San Mateo County.

Hard evidence of golf's impact on these species is surprisingly hard to find. A single snake was found killed by a mower at Sharp Park in 2005. A year later, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service issued a review of the snake's status, theorizing that chemicals used on golf courses in its habitat range — including Sharp Park — posed a threat, but noted that no environmental toxicology tests confirmed this. Meanwhile, biologists' observations that pumping water from portions of the course to prevent flooding left masses of frogs' eggs to dry out and die have obligated the city, under federal regulations, to let those areas stay flooded in the winter.

The question of what constitutes proper ecological stewardship at Sharp Park is not a simple one. In December, the Board of Supervisors' Government Audit and Oversight Committee heard testimony from Karen Swaim, one of the state's foremost wildlife biologists, to the effect that the existing golf course is not only harmless insofar as the red-legged frog and garter snake are concerned, but is actually necessary to their survival. She argued that Sharp Park's previous incarnation as an artichoke farm built over salty coastal wetlands could not have supported a population of red-legged frogs — which live and breed only in fresh water — and hence would not have attracted the snakes, which feed on them.

She noted that both species were first observed at Sharp Park in the 1940s, after the golf course had been in operation for a decade, and predicted that both would die out at the site if the seawall were removed or breached. "Golf is not what is responsible for the decline of the San Francisco garter snake," Swaim said. "You need to protect the seawall. ... You need to have a freshwater, managed habitat currently for this species ... and that is all there is to it."

This way of looking at Sharp Park has gotten some traction in the environmental community. "By putting the golf course in, it changed to a freshwater environment from salt, and into that freshwater environment moved two endangered species," says Mike Ferreira, an officer with the Loma Prieta chapter of the Sierra Club. "If you undo that environment, it's a detriment to the species. Restoring it to a salt environment is a no-no ... and that's what happens when you return it to the way it was." Even the name of the central marsh at Sharp Park, Laguna Salada — "Salty Lagoon" — would appear to hint at a historically brackish body of water.

Others dispute this view, arguing that other coastal water bodies — such as Rodeo Lagoon in the Marin Headlands — support healthy populations of frogs in their inland reaches, where salinity levels decline. Asked about the etymology of Laguna Salada, Plater evinces a note of exasperation. "It's kind of like Mount Diablo," he says. "The Spanish came and they thought devils lived on top of the mountain, whereas the native people thought it was nirvana. Trying to do historical ecology just based on common names created by people who used to live there is a sophomoric attempt to look at what needs to be done."

Jeff Miller is a San Francisco–based conservation advocate at the Center for Biological Diversity, a national nonprofit that has filed a notice of intent to sue the city over alleged Endangered Species Act violations at Sharp Park. He says arguments that restoration would harm the snake and frog are based on "misconceptions" about both historical conditions at the site and environmentalists' vision for what it would look like without golf. Before the course was built, "it wasn't one big salt pond," he says. "What was there before the golf course was primarily a freshwater system that occasionally had saltwater." Moreover, any environmental restoration should at least temporarily preserve the seawall to prevent abrupt saltwater flooding, he says.

Demons, salt, snakes, storms, golf — the abstract debate over what course man and nature should take at Sharp Park tends to range far afield. It's odd, then, that one of the more basic aspects of the discussion — how much any of this will cost, and whether San Francisco can afford it in a time of severe budget crisis — has barely been broached at City Hall. When it has come up in talks, it turns out that, despite the rosy picture painted by Rec and Park officials, maintaining a golf course in Pacifica is going to cost an awful lot.

The key to understanding the true scope of the financial burden Sharp Park poses lies in looking away from proposed renovations at Sharp itself and toward the infrastructure needed to sustain a golf course on this flood-prone coastal flat in the first place. While the expense of realigning the course to create a more hospitable enclave for the frog and snake is not insignificant — according to Rec and Park estimates, it could rise as high as \$11.3 million — the more consequential costs involved in keeping Sharp Park open are those attached to a large-scale recycled-water project and required repairs to the seawall that protects the course (and its amphibian and reptilian inhabitants) from harmful incursions of saltwater.

It's worth noting, at the outset, that Sharp Park does bring in revenue from greens fees. The problem is that when operating expenses are factored in, the golf course doesn't turn out to be much of a moneymaker. Since 2006, it has brought the city an average of about \$1.2 million annually, according to an April 2009 report from the Board of Supervisors' budget analyst. In fiscal year 2008-2009, however, it ran an operating deficit of \$43,000 when expenses were accounted for. Of course, such small running deficits aren't a big deal, far outstripped as they are by the looming cost of capital improvements. "In its day-to-day operational costs, it's fairly negligible in terms of what the deficit is," Mirkarimi says. "But that's not the issue that's before us."

The issue is the big projects the city has to undertake at Sharp Park. Start with the seawall. Built over the course of about a decade beginning in 1941, the wall today is a large, earthen structure, girded on the beach side with stone riprap, which spans 3,200 feet of Sharp Park's western border. According to a 2009 report by Arup engineering consultants for the San Francisco Department of Public Works, the seawall has suffered two serious failures since then: In 1958, waves overtopped the structure and left most of the golf course underwater, and in 1983 the wall breached, allowing incoming tides to carry sand onto Sharp Park's lawns. Along with these incidents, the wall has been subject — like other seaside structures in Pacifica — to the steady, undermining effects of sea-level rise and erosion. The Arup report found that up to 300 feet of beach has been lost since the golf course was constructed.

The report also found that the seawall has deteriorated since its last renovation in 1989, and that a "high risk" exists that portions of it could collapse in the face of sea-level rise or storms. To bring the entire structure up to snuff would cost \$12 to \$14 million; more focused repairs, aimed only at the wall's weakest section, would require \$6 to \$7 million. The consultants recommended the cheaper option.

To some outside observers, even these hefty sums underestimate the real cost of maintaining the Sharp Park seawall over the coming decades. One of them is Bob Battalio, a Pacifica resident and

senior engineer at Philip Williams & Associates, a San Francisco hydrology firm that performs environmental and technical studies for municipalities. In April 2009, Battalio wrote to the Board of Supervisors, predicting that \$32 million was a realistic price for a "well-engineered" stone seawall that would adequately minimize the risk of flooding. "If you really want to hold the line there, and prevent coastal erosion from coming past the existing body, I think that's a very expensive proposition," he tells *SF Weekly*, noting that underinvesting in the wall now would only defer future expenses from additional upgrades and repairs. "If they don't put enough money in now, there may be a perception that it's not that expensive. But ultimately it will be."

Along with the seawall and the needed renovations on the golf course itself, the third main cost-driver at Sharp Park is the city's share of a joint recycled-water project with Pacifica's North Coast County Water District. According to the terms of a 2004 agreement negotiated by the San Francisco Public Utilities Commission, the city will pay a sum toward the project proportional to the share of water from the new system that Sharp Park will use. In 2004, the golf course was estimated to use about 74 percent of the water from the project.

How much does that work out to? According to federal records on projects receiving American Recovery and Reinvestment Act (ARRA) stimulus funds, the recycled-water project will cost \$8.8 million, with \$2.2 million in stimulus money to offset local government's share of the price tag. According to PUC spokesman Tyrone Jue, San Francisco's share of the remaining cost is \$5.1 million.

The siphoning of federal stimulus funds toward a golf course so steeped in controversy has provoked some outcry in itself. Last December, Sharp Park made its debut on the national political stage — as an example of government waste. In a "Stimulus Checkup" report devoted to ridiculing uses of the \$787 billion secured by President Barack Obama for economic recovery projects, McCain and Coburn spotlighted the Sharp Park recycled-water project. "While the golf course was designed by Alister MacKenzie, best known for designing Augusta National, Sharp Park has not followed in Augusta's successful footsteps," the Republican senators opined.

In addition to the \$5.1 million for recycled water and at least \$6 million for seawall repairs at Sharp Park, an additional expense must be accounted for: legal and consulting fees associated with obtaining permits for any renovations from the gauntlet of state and federal regulatory agencies that have jurisdiction over the property. Sharp's seaside location and resident endangered species make it subject to environmental review under both the California Environmental Quality Act (CEQA) and the National Environmental Protection Act (NEPA). There's currently no way of estimating those costs, but coastal developers typically pay at least a few hundred thousand dollars for required studies and permits under the two laws.

Last fall, the city's Recreation and Park Commission adopted a plan it hoped would balance the needs of snakes, frogs, and golfers at Sharp Park: a renovation of the course, keeping all 18 holes intact but moving one and adjusting others to create more natural habitat. The price tag on this option was set at somewhere between \$5.9 and \$11.3 million, depending on how much excavated land could be reused at the property.

In the months since this approach became city policy, however, federal authorities say nothing has been brought to them for official approval. "I know they have a couple of ideas, but they haven't aired anything under CEQA or NEPA for us to review," says Chris Nagano, chief of the endangered-species division at the Sacramento field office of the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service. "The reality is there's nothing for us to look at." (Rec and Park spokesman Elton Pon says department officials are still exploring how to finance renovations at Sharp Park, and hope to have an environmental review of its natural-habitat areas completed during the summer of 2011.)

Environmental activists, angry Republican senators, mazes of federal and state bureaucracy: The obstacles arrayed against Sharp Park are diverse indeed. With so many factions drawing a bead on

the golf course, what recourse does it have for a viable future? As it turns out, there is one approach that advocates say would cost the city next to nothing. But it would mean turning Sharp Park over to the federal government — and giving up on golf for good.

Coastal wilderness and wetlands restoration — from the dairy ranches of Marin County to San Francisco's Crissy Field — has been a principal goal of the Park Service in recent years, and Sharp Park seems like a promising candidate for such an overhaul, at least from the point of view of federal officials. The city could, in theory, try to hand over the entire property to the National Park Service, which already manages the adjacent Mori Point preserve as part of the Golden Gate National Recreation Area (GGNRA). Would the feds be interested?

"We're open," GGNRA spokeswoman Chris Powell says. "We have said all along that if the city were to discontinue golf and were interested in having it restored to a natural area, then we would be interested in talking to the city." Powell also said the GGNRA would potentially be willing to undertake this restoration from start to finish on its own, removing virtually all financial responsibility from San Francisco. Under this scenario, Sharp Park could be united with Mori Point to form an unbroken wildlife area. "We do have endangered-species habitat next door, and we think it would be important to have contiguous habitat," she says.

Supervisor Sean Elsbernd, a golf enthusiast who led the charge to renovate Harding Park, doesn't like the idea of giving Sharp Park to the federal government. "We've been given a tremendous resource, and to just give it away, I think, would be a waste," he says. Instead, he thinks the golf course can and should stay — provided the city can find other government agencies to help pay the bills.

"San Francisco should not have to bear 100 percent of the costs associated with everything that needs to happen down there," Elsbernd says. In particular, he says, government agencies in San Mateo County should capitalize on the course's popularity among their constituents — "Sharp Park is wildly popular south of the border, if not north of the border" between San Francisco and San Mateo counties, he notes wryly — to raise money for capital improvements. "It's going to depend on what the sources of funds are." Sharp Park should stay, he says, "if they're not taking away from hiring a rec director or gardener in our neighborhood parks."

But with local governments across the country groaning under the recession, contributions from other cities might not come easily. Julie Lancelle, a Pacifica City Council member, is an outspoken proponent of keeping 18 holes of golf at Sharp Park. "It's a beautiful, mature public golf course that's been in the center of our town for as long as Pacifica's been a city," she says. Her ardor wanes, however, when the subject of helping to pay for capital improvements comes up. "I don't know how much revenue we could bring to that," she says, noting that Pacifica's \$28 million general fund is facing a five-year projected deficit of several million dollars. "But we could certainly bring support and some level of experience."

U.S. Rep. Jackie Speier, whose district includes Pacifica, has already submitted initial requests for federal funding to support Sharp Park. In two separate proposals to the House Transportation and Infrastructure Committee, she has asked for \$5 million to help support restoration of snake habitat on parts of the course, and \$500,000 to pay for more studies of the seawall. "These are requests, not promises," aide Brian Perkins says in an interview, noting that it can take up to eight years to process such proposals at the federal level. He adds that Speier supports the idea of balancing golf and wild habitat on the property: "She thinks that both are legitimate uses of public lands, and that both can be accomplished. Good evidence suggests that's true."

Sharp Park's predicament sounds many familiar themes to those who have watched the politics of California's coastal development for the past 40 years. This is yet another charming and historically significant seaside establishment that has to deal with increasingly stringent state and

federal environmental regulations — as well as new social views on how the shoreline should be used — under which it could never have been built in the first place.

At Sharp Park, as elsewhere, the cost of complying is high, and some say the public deserves a fuller debate over the course's future that doesn't hew to the drawn battle lines of "snakes versus golf."

"To be distilled into that kind of characterization, to me that misses the whole thrust of the argument to begin with," Mirkarimi says. Miller says the December plan from Rec and Park "wasn't based on science. It was based on the presumption that the golf course had to stay no matter what."

That's not to say that an honest financial assessment of Sharp Park Golf Course means that the public, or elected officials, won't choose to keep it around. To Neilson, who was out for an afternoon round at Sharp Park recently, the millions of dollars the city must pour into the golf course would be worth it. "There's no cheap way out of this dilemma," he says. "There's no way to do this without spending money." Even if it costs \$17 million or more? Neilson smiles and shakes his head. "We're in America," he says. "Money is Jesus. Get down on your knees and pray."