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Restore Sharp Park

restoresharppark.org



The Restoration Vision

There is no hope for the future like prudent action in the present. And nothing could be more prudent than restoring Sharp Park. One of the last great restoration opportunities on California's coast, Sharp Park's restoration provides an oasis of hope in an area facing local, regional, and global environmental problems. Sharp Park can be transformed now from an exclusive, underused, and budget-breaking golf course into a community-centered model for natural flood control, outdoor recreation, sustainable land use, and endangered species recovery.

Restoring Sharp Park will increase recreational opportunities for people from all walks of life and reconnect people to the historic values and great discoveries made in this watershed. A new Sharp Park trail will connect with the California Coastal Trail, the Bay Area Ridge Trail, and the surrounding GGNRA lands. Strategically-placed viewing platforms along Laguna Salada will invite artists and photographers, bird watchers, and people young and old to get up close and experience the sights and sounds of these restored lands. The trail will then loop back to Sharp Park's restored visitor center and local natural science museum. Children from San Francisco, Pacifica, and from all over the Bay Area will enjoy desperately needed nature-oriented educational programs conducted in outdoor settings and science labs at the science museum, while scientists from around the world will come to Sharp Park to study global climate change, sea level rise, and the great diversity of plants and animals found at the site. Other exhibits in the visitor center will tell the tale of the people who lived here throughout the ages: American Indians, Spanish explorers and missionaries, farmers, millionaires, rum runners, and the military personnel who kept watch at the two Nike missile sites in the area. The visitor center will also contain a sustainable local-food restaurant, where visitors may eat-in or take out for a picnic beside a restored Sanchez Creek.

Restoring Sharp Park will also protect homes and structures from changes wrought by global warming. Sharp Park golf course is often unplayable because its poor design and audacious location—the golf course was built on and around Laguna Salada, a natural backbarrier lagoon—makes it vulnerable to both coastal and freshwater flooding. As climate change causes oceans to rise and storm frequency and intensity to increase, the naturally wet conditions of this landscape will become increasingly difficult and expensive to control. This will make the course's marginal business plan completely untenable: more and more money will be spent in an ultimately futile attempt to transform a landscape determined to be a wetland into a fairway. Restoring Sharp Park is the most cost-effective way to manage water flow and protect our coastline from climate change. A restored Laguna Salada will be a more effective flood management tool than the reinforced sea walls and massive pumps planned for the course: and restoration will do this at a fraction of the cost.

Restoring Sharp Park will preserve and improve habitat for the endangered San Francisco garter snake, the most beautiful - and arguably most imperiled- serpent in North America, and the threatened California red-legged frog, the largest native frog in the West, a species made famous by Mark Twain's Celebrated Jumping Frog of Calaveras County. Both of these species are currently harmed by the ongoing management and operation of the golf course. Maintaining the existing golf course while keeping these species around will require hundreds of millions of dollars of infrastructure investments, investments that in the end are unlikely to succeed in keeping these animals around for future generations to enjoy. A restored Sharp Park will provide people from the Bay Area and beyond with diverse recreational opportunities, effective flood control management, and a haven for our endangered species to thrive.

Even the process of restoration will help people reconnect to California's coast. During restoration, ongoing site stewardship programs will engage volunteers from around the Bay Area in rejuvenating their natural community. Building and maintaining trails, growing and planting native plants, and monitoring environmental quality are just a few of the volunteer opportunities available for school age children, seniors and everyone in between.



California red-legged frog



San Francisco garter snake

Whether they come from over the hill or across the globe, visitors to a restored Sharp Park will discover one of California's premiere landscapes with a diverse topography: sheer cliffs and bluffs, beaches, lagoons, creeks, canyons, grasslands, scrublands, forests and hills will all become available for exploration. From day hikes to overnight adventures, a restored Sharp Park will provide something for everyone: including the endangered species that call this place home. Sharp Park's restoration will inspire our youth, rejuvenate our spirit, and take us that much closer to a more sustainable and just world.



A restored Sharp Park will increase recreational opportunities, improve coastal access, improve flood control, and help endangered species recover.



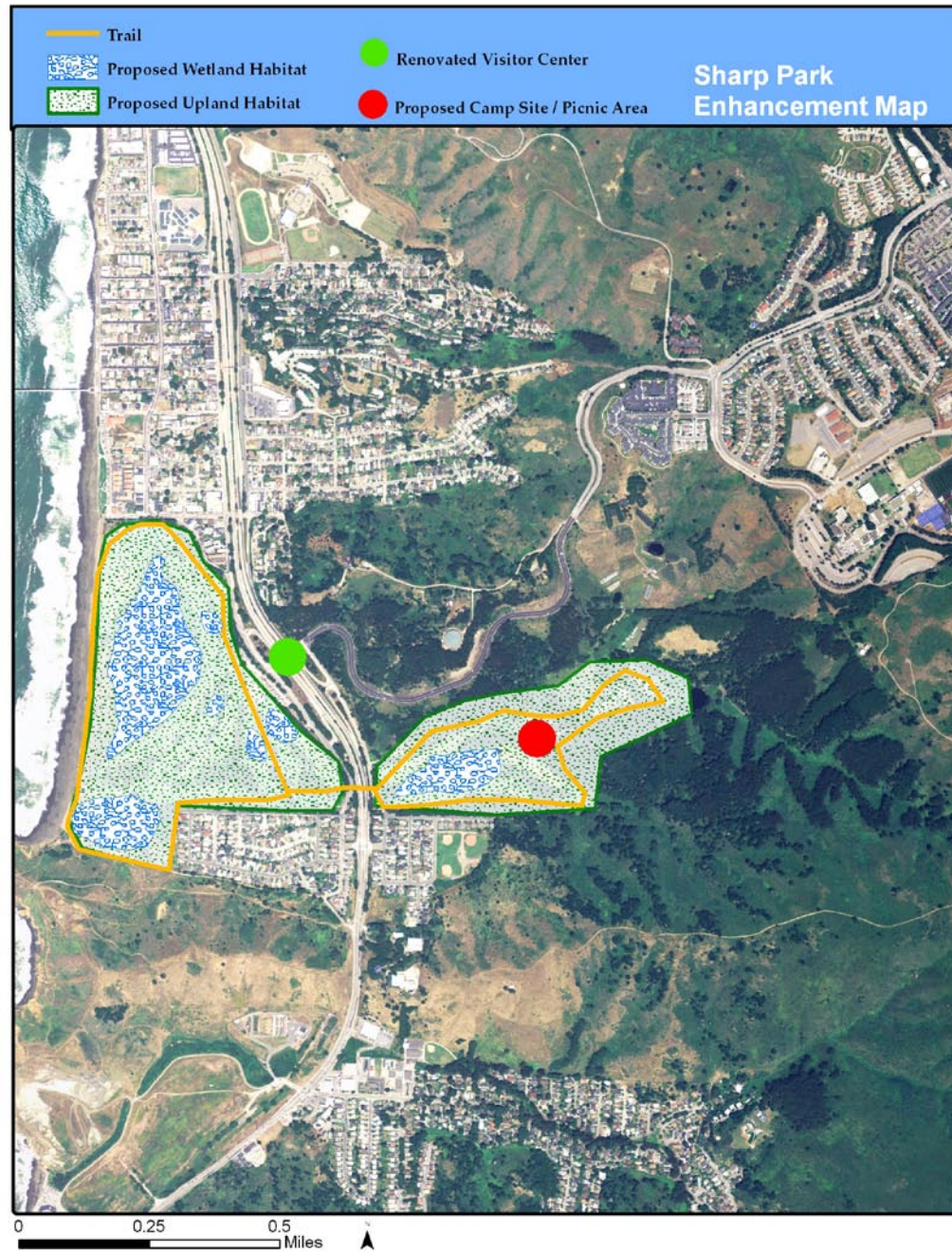
A restored Sharp Park will create new opportunities to spur local economies while moving towards a more sustainable society.



Existing Sharp Park



Potential Sharp Park



The Younger Report

San Francisco's Recreation and Parks Department (RPD) has finally released the golf course plan that it commissioned from Leon Younger of Pros Consulting. This plan is deeply flawed. By failing to solve flood management and endangered species problems, the plan imposes huge financial and legal risks to the City and County of San Francisco and its taxpayers.

In a nutshell, the RPD plan calls for a) privatization of all public golf courses; and b) reconstruction of Sharp Park as an "elite" and expensive golf course with all 18 holes west of Highway 1 plus a new "Junior Golf" facility east of Highway 1.

Here are the many fatal flaws in this proposal:

1. The plan makes the golf course's current flood management problems significantly worse. The entire basin west of Highway 1 is near or below sea level. Yet this is exactly where the plan places all 18 holes of this course. Currently 3-4 holes of the course are under water and unplayable for months at a time. This plan would place the entire course in such jeopardy. The established sea wall prevents salt water intrusion onto the golf course but dams freshwater drainage from Sanchez Creek resulting in regular flooding and hole closures. The plan's inclusion of more holes in that flood zone means more hole closures and greater economic loss.

2. The plan's failure to solve the flood management problems will create significant legal liability to San Francisco for flood damage to adjacent properties. During heavy rains, water backs up from Sharp Park into surrounding neighborhoods because the sea wall blocks appropriate drainage of Sanchez Creek. By not mitigating this problem, San Francisco will sooner or later be obligated to pay out huge damages from flooded-out neighbors.

3. The plan will subject San Francisco to large civil and criminal penalties for illegal "taking" of the endangered San Francisco garter snake and the threatened California red-legged frog. Biologists hired by RPD showed that the entire area of Sharp Park is habitat for the snake, not just the tiny areas cordoned off in the RPD/Younger report. It is a physical impossibility for golf operations to continue, particularly in the intensified fashion proposed by the plan, without killing both frogs and snakes. Illegal take of both has indeed already been frequently documented, and this will only increase under this plan. At some \$25,000s per incident, San Francisco's taxpayers will be on the hook for serious costs -- and San Francisco officials who are responsible for this illegal activity will be at significant risk for criminal penalties.

4. The plan will invoke prohibitively expensive permits and permit processes. Not only are these costs completely neglected in the plan, they also will be lost investments when the plan is rejected on solid scientific grounds. San Francisco is not free to do whatever it likes with this property even though it owns it. The California Coastal Commission, the California Department of Fish and Game, and the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service all have jurisdiction here. In particular, a Habitat Conservation Plan will be mandatory, and this step will cost some hundreds of thousands of dollars and will take as long as 8-10 years. Ultimately San Francisco will expend well over seven figures on environmental planning just to seek permission for this plan before it finds it rejected.

5. The plan's market analysis for continuing golf in Sharp Park is bogus on its face. The plan conjectures mutually inconsistent expectations that the course can raise fees by over \$100/round while simultaneously dramatically increasing the number of rounds played at the course-- primarily from women, minority, and junior players, Bay Area residents that typically comprise the smallest components of the golf market. It is quite clear that the golf market will NOT support this vision: most public courses are currently running well below 50% capacity despite the deep discounts currently offered at the course. Raising prices while increasing demand doesn't pass Economics 101.

6. The RPD process leading up to this plan has been improper and disingenuous. The Golf Task Force's meetings have frequently been canceled at the last moment by RPD officials, apparently so that they could proceed with planning without input from the Task Force. The RPD has refused to provide materials to Task Force members and has redacted those materials it has reluctantly handed over with a heavy hand. There is no reason at this point to retain any confidence in the RPD's intentions or judgment.

7. The plan, if pursued further by the RPD, will be met with a costly lawsuit. Opposition to the continued destruction of endangered species habitat in Sharp Park is vigorous and uniform in the environmental community, and the City and County of San Francisco will have an immediate opportunity to learn the scale of this opposition if it proceeds with this plan in any fashion.

Sharp Park Golf Course

Sharp Park, owned and operated by San Francisco but located in Pacifica, was once the Recreation and Parks Department's southernmost gem. Rich in both natural and human history, Sharp Park contained a unique back-barrier lagoon, acres of flood-dampening wetlands, and healthy wildlife populations found nowhere else on Earth. The low-point in a large watershed emptying into the Pacific Ocean, Sharp Park contained several natural features critical to water transport and coastal biodiversity, including Sanchez Creek and Laguna Salada, both of which provided food and shelter for endangered species.

But in one of the City's great acts of hubris, nearly 80 years ago San Francisco radically altered Sharp Park's natural features by dredging and filling the area to create Sharp Park Golf Course. Designed by celebrated golf architect Allister MacKenzie, the course today is an ecological disaster, an economic failure, and a pockmark on Mackenzie's otherwise stellar resume.

To create enough dry land for a golf course on the natural wetlands surrounding Laguna Salada, San Francisco dredged and filled the area for 14 months. Despite this extraordinarily lengthy effort, San Francisco's attempt to reconfigure Sharp Park's wetlands was not successful. Indeed, the golf course's ceremonial opening day was delayed twice because of wet playing conditions. The course has struggled with water management and flood control issues ever since, in large part because of the course's poor design and unfortunate placement.

But it rapidly became apparent to golf course managers that Sharp Park's incessant freshwater flooding paled in comparison to the biggest threat caused by MacKenzie's design. MacKenzie placed several golf links on the beach west of Laguna Salada, and in the process destroyed the coastal storm protection provided by the barrier beach that naturally occurred at the site.



Normal winter rains flood many areas of Sharp Park, and the Golf Course's attempts to drain the water kills California red-legged frogs, the largest frog in the West, made famous by Mark Twain's Celebrated Jumping Frog of Calaveras County.

The folly of this decision became painfully apparent twice in the ensuing decades, when massive storm surges brought coastal floods nearly to the doorstep of the golf clubhouse. MacKenzie's coastal links were completely destroyed, and deferred maintenance and the construction of Highway 1 made even more of MacKenzie's work unrecognizable, and often unplayable.

After the second coastal storm surge, San Francisco began constructing - without the requisite permits - a sea wall to protect the course from further destruction. Ironically, the sea wall made freshwater flooding worse: the sea wall blocked the natural outlet of Sanchez Creek, causing freshwater to flood several links.

In the meantime, frog and snake restoration efforts spurred by the federal Endangered Species Act were bearing fruit on public lands surrounding Sharp Park. Soon it became apparent that water pumps installed by the golf course to transport freshwater across the sea wall were killing red-legged frogs: as the pumps lowered the water levels, frog egg masses became stranded on aquatic vegetation and entire frogs generations were put into jeopardy. Even worse, ongoing operation and maintenance of the golf course itself was killing San Francisco garter snakes: as the snakes basked in the upland areas around Laguna Salada, they'd be run over and killed by lawn mowers.

Sharp Park was also suffering financially. From 2001 to 2006, rounds played at Sharp Park declined by 38% because of substandard playing conditions and poor customer service. Between 2004 and 2008, the City of San Francisco lost between \$30,000 and \$300,000 every year on Sharp Park, and projections of future loses collectively amount to many millions more. Combined with the millions of dollars of capital improvements needed to return Sharp Park to acceptable playing conditions and the millions more needed to improve habitat conditions for the endangered species present at the site, Sharp Park has become one of San Francisco's most expensive recreational extravagances.

Some have argued that the best way to improve Sharp Park's financial condition is to restore Allister MacKenzie's original design. Putting aside the ecological and financial constraints on such a vision, the MacKenzie's design is an anachronism in today's modern game of graphite clubs and advanced ball design. Indeed, public MacKenzie courses as close as Sacramento have been radically redesigned, rather than restored, in order to capture a larger share of the modern golf market.

Furthermore, surveys of San Francisco residents show that the number one recreational demand is more hiking and biking trails, while golf ranks seventeenth. This inequity between demand and supply has created an opportunity to reconsider our use of Sharp Park and to request that restoration be pursued so all San Franciscans may enjoy this land.