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NORTHERN CALIFORNIA'S LARGEST NEWSPAPER

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## Fight continues over fate of Sharp Park course

by JOHN KING

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The phrase “historic landscape” conjures up visions of cobblestoned streets or revered public grounds, a la Golden Gate Park.

A determined band of golfers want landmark status applied to something quite different: a golf course in Pacifica, with a highway on one side and a seawall on the other.

Known as Sharp Park Golf Course, the facility that opened in 1932 was designed by Alister MacKenzie, who also designed such fabled courses as Cypress Point Club in Pebble Beach. His client was John McLaren, the legendary superintendent of San Francisco’s parks from 1890 until his death in 1943.

That lineage has golfers petitioning the city of Pacifica to declare the course a historic landmark - a designation aimed in part at environmental activists who want the site off Highway 1 converted into habitat for the San Francisco garter snake and the California red-legged frog.

“Outside of Cypress, it’s one of MacKenzie’s most spectacular

designs,” said Bo Links, an attorney and self-described “golf architecture guru” who testified to the course’s merit at a recent hearing of the Pacifica Planning Commission. “I might not worry about it so much if there weren’t people trying to get rid of it.”

The golfers are no more ardent than the critics who, at the very least, want the course reduced from 18 to nine holes as part of a wetland-restoration process. Their position is that the endangered snake and the threatened frog take precedence over the rarity of a public golf course by a renowned designer.

### **Threat to sue S.F.**

The biggest club is wielded by the Center for Biological Diversity, an advocacy group that, in 2008, threatened to sue the owner, the city of San Francisco, for conditions that allow garter snakes and frogs to be harmed or killed. The most vocal critic is a former attorney for the center whose all-fronts assault includes an attack on the layout of the links.

“Alister MacKenzie designed some great golf courses, but Sharp Park was his biggest mistake,” said Brent Plater, who now teaches at San Francisco State University and wants Sharp Park recast with

boardwalks and enlarged lagoons, the clubhouse turned into a visitors’ center. “If it becomes a historic landmark, we are undermining his legacy.”

McLaren hired MacKenzie to shape land given to San Francisco by sugar magnate Adolph Spreckels. The few pre-course photographs that exist show a procession of sand dunes leading to the ocean, with an inland lake and few trees.

What debuted in 1932 was a course with 18 holes encircling the lake and draped across extremely rearranged dunes. Nature had other ideas. In 1941, four holes were abandoned with new ones added to the east. A seawall was added to protect the course.

Plater holds up the changes as proof that the course has no historic integrity. He faults the original design as well, because the leveling of dunes violated such MacKenzie maxims as “on a seaside course ... the most important thing is to make the fullest possible use of existing features.”

“There is no question this is the worst of his golf courses,” proclaimed the self-described “former caddy.”

That isn't the view held by the Cultural Landscape Foundation, a national organization that, in July, declared the course a "landscape at risk." As for Links and other boosters, the loss of four holes doesn't undermine what remains - 14 fairways bordered by thick Monterey pines with the ambling undulations that were a MacKenzie trademark.

"He was, at the time, the leading golf architect in the world," Links said. "He combined all these features that are found in snippets somewhere else."

### **Vote delayed**

Pacifica's planning commission has delayed a vote on landmark status at least until September. That's also when San Francisco's Recreation and Park Department might release a Sharp Park restoration plan.

The request for the plan came from Supervisor Ross Mirkarimi, a member of the Green Party. It requires options that include a nine-hole course and no course at all.

Golfers and their Pacifica supporters - including Mayor Julie Lancelle - argue that restoration can be done so the golf course thrives. A piped stretch of water could be opened and fringed by native landscaping. Clogged drainage could be brought to modern standards.

The opponents don't want to stop there.

"It seems to us the best solution is to close the golf course" and engineer a restructured landscape of freshwater marshes and upland areas, said Jeff Miller of the Center for Biological Diversity. "There aren't a lot of places where the San Francisco garter snake occurs."

One is the area around San Francisco International Airport - an environment where the snake's losses have been far more severe.

Miller was asked if the center has considered litigation to shrink the airport's footprint to create new habitat.

"We're not going to sue to close SFO," Miller said. "You've got to pick a battle that makes sense and that you can win."

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