

Will Sharp Park Golf Course become a nature preserve?

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Posted: 03/23/2009 02:59:16 PM PDT

Updated: 03/23/2009 07:12:19 PM PDT

PACIFICA — The peace and quiet of Sharp Park Golf Course seemed surreal Monday in contrast with the controversy surrounding it.

Golfers teed off without seeming to know that their days on the course could be numbered.

Disagreement over the future of the golf course, located in Pacifica but owned and maintained by San Francisco, ruptured into a public schism last week when two members of the San Francisco Board of Supervisors offered differing visions for managing the property — including an option to close the golf course and transform it into a wildlife preserve to protect two threatened species, the California red-legged frog and the San Francisco garter snake.

The Center for Biological Diversity has threatened to sue the city over what they call abuses to both species, but it agreed this winter to hold its fire if the city would negotiate a phased solution.

Supervisor Ross Mirkarimi's legislation asks city staff members to draft legislation exploring a couple of alternatives, one of which involves developing a restoration plan for the golf course and the rest of city property in Pacifica, including an archery range and a former rifle range that is slated for cleanup.

The legislation also asks city staff members to look into transferring the land to the National Park Service or jointly managing the property with the

agency, which raises the possibility of shrinking the golf course or transforming it into a 400-acre park with managed wetlands.

Mirkarimi requested that the legislation consider both maintaining the golf course and eliminating it.

Mirkarimi's move prompted fellow Supervisor Sean Elsbernd to introduce a last-minute, one-page riposte directing the City Attorney's Office to look into declaring the golf course a historic landmark. The course was designed by well-known golf course architect Alister MacKenzie, who also built Augusta National Golf Course in Georgia.

Reached by telephone on Monday, Elsbernd was quick to predict that neither his nor Mirkarimi's language will ever turn into actual legislation. However, the discussion will "precipitate stronger negotiations" between the Center for Biological Diversity and the city's Recreation & Park Department.

"Do I genuinely believe it will be landmarked? No. One side is throwing a bookmark down, I'm throwing down another," said Elsbernd, who said he would "fight" to retain the public 18-hole golf course. "Golf and the environment are not mutually exclusive. They can work together, and I have every expectation that we can make that happen."

San Francisco has been studying how to divest itself of many of its golf courses, most of which are losing money. Pacifica has fought hard to retain the golf course, an important indirect source of tourist income. Pacifica officials have even offered to take over management of the golf course, an offer that San Francisco has declined.

"Our bottom line has always been that it remains a golf course and we're willing to do whatever we can to see that happen," said Pacifica City Manager



Stephen Rhodes.

Both San Francisco and Pacifica argue that Sharp Park is marginally profitable, although the Center for Biological Diversity disputes that.

Longtime Sharp Park golfer David Diller, president of the Sharp Park Golf Club, does not like the idea that he and his fellow golfers may be an endangered species themselves. Flooding on the course, a seasonal occurrence, has partially closed the 14th fairway, and existing protections for red-legged frogs prevent pumping the water out when the frogs are laying their eggs in the spring.

"There's always this misconception that if you're pro-golf you're anti-environment — but nothing could be farther than the truth," Diller said. "(Sharp Park) has been there for over 70 years. If we're doing such a terrible job, why are there still San Francisco garter snakes and red-legged frogs?"

At \$12 for seniors and \$20 for residents of San Francisco or Pacifica, Sharp Park has long been touted as one of the most affordable public golf courses in the area — an important consideration for golfers on a fixed income and residents on a budget.

On a Web site devoted to Sharp Park, www.restoresharpark.org, the Center for Biological Diversity calls for transforming the "exclusive, underused and budget-breaking golf course" into a series of wetlands with trails, a visitor center and camping and picnic zones. The costs are not discussed, although Jeff Miller, an advocate with the center, thinks that such an epic project would easily attract state and federal dollars.

"Our position is that the best use of the site is to close the golf course," he said. "We're certainly willing to hear if the Recreation & Park Department

thinks that it can keep the golf course or keep a portion of it open while addressing the endangered species problem."

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