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Restoring Sharp Park to natural ecosystems would save millions

OPINION

By Brent Plater and Jeff Miller

The City's Sharp Park Golf Course in Pacifica has been studied in depth by scientific experts with unparalleled expertise in aquatic ecology and wildlife, hydrology, coastal engineering and ecosystem restoration.

The scientists' consensus is that removing the golf course to restore habitat east of the lagoon is essential for the long-term sustainability of endangered species. They recommend removing the seawall and the golf course and restoring the functions of the original natural ecosystem to protect the endangered San Francisco garter snake and red-legged frog.

The proposed restoration is also the best way to improve flood protection for adjacent residential areas. And it will save taxpayers tens of millions of dollars in comparison to either the status quo or the Park Department's proposal — with lower long-term costs and maintenance requirements.

The San Francisco Department of Recreation and Park itself last month publicly conceded that the seawall must go to save the endangered species and protect the beach from erosion. Examiner columnist Ken Garcia's Sunday column asserted that if the Sharp Park seawall were removed, "the salt-water assault would likely wash away the lagoon that provides life for the frogs" has been disproved as myth. This is misinformation promoted by golf advocates angling for continued taxpayer funding to maintain a failing course that poses huge liabilities for San Francisco and Pacifica.

Does Garcia want taxpayers to shell out the \$18 million in major projects needed to "save" the financially failing course, along with additional costs for infrastructure, operations and continuing liability for fines for Endangered Species Act violations?

The Park Department's 2009 golf enhancement plan would have bled taxpayers indefinitely to pay for expensive and futile infrastructure and cause

erosion that would destroy the beach. It would also squeeze endangered species between the uninhabitable golf course and the seawall, limiting suitable habitat and forcing freshwater species into the areas most affected by rising sea levels and salinity.

As policymakers begin budget deliberations with an eye to purging government waste, Sharp Park stands out as a poster child of irresponsible spending. The savings from closing the course would help restore much-needed community services and neighborhood recreation centers and parks, including golf courses actually within San Francisco. The proposed restoration is the most sensible decision for our pocketbooks, communities and endangered species.