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Big Wedge Over Sharp Park's Future

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Rundown Public Golf Course in Limbo as Environmentalists and San Francisco County Battle Over What to Do With It.

PACIFICA—Sharp Park Golf Course here is in a state of disrepair, covered with patches of dried grass and overgrown weeds. Yet the 80-year-old public course is the prize at the center of a legal tussle between two counties and environmentalists.

Last March, environmental groups sued San Francisco County, which owns Sharp Park, in U.S. District Court of Northern California. They allege officials failed to protect habitats on the course for endangered species of frogs and snakes and say the course should be turned into an open park.

“This is a poorly maintained, money-losing public golf course that no one has the money to manage and yet local leaders don’t want to make it a park,” says Jeff Miller, a spokesman for the Center for Biological Diversity, one of the groups that filed the lawsuit.

“I am dismayed and surprised the opposition is using its limited resources against San Francisco when the city has demonstrated a



Jason Henry for The Wall Street Journal

San Mateo Assistant County Manager David Holland checks out a flooded cart path on the 17th hole at Sharp Park Golf Course in Pacifica.

commitment to protecting the habitat,” says deputy city attorney Jim Emery, who is arguing the case. “There are so many more real environmental problems in the state.”

A 2007 study commissioned by San Francisco County concluded that the golf course was a money loser and poorly maintained. The Parks Commission doesn’t break out the financials for individual parks.

Yet the course continues to be used, with about 40,000 rounds a year played there, according to Sharp Park officials.

The San Francisco Parks Commission, whose budget has shrunk 30% in the past seven years to about \$120 million, doesn’t want to spend the money to repair the course, and the county’s regulations prevent it from selling park land. But neighboring San Mateo County, where Sharp Park is actually located, is interested in taking over the course and fixing it up. The land for Sharp Park was willed to San Francisco County in the 1930s.

A 2009 study commissioned by the San Francisco Parks Commission found that restoration of the course could cost as much as \$10 million.

San Francisco and San Mateo began negotiating a 30-year lease of Sharp Park in January. The environmentalists' lawsuit has hampered negotiations, but park officials say they hope to complete the deal by the end of the summer. Still, the trial, which is set to begin in October, could disrupt those plans.

"Things are up in the air until this is settled," says Mark Buell, president of the San Francisco Parks Commission.

The situation at Sharp Park is symptomatic of the kinds of skirmishes under way across San Francisco over park lands. Hit by steep cuts to the parks budget in the past few years, the Parks Commission has been working to find new revenue and overhaul park management, setting in motion a number of changes at the county's 224 parks. Some of those moves have raised concerns from environmental groups, which have been striking back with lawsuits and other tactics to slow or stop the changes.

In 2010, for instance, the Parks Commission announced plans to upgrade and overhaul management of the 70-year-old Stow Lake Boat House in Golden Gate Park. Environmentalists and activists joined up with the Boat House's prior management to thwart the effort. After unsuccessfully suing to stop the changes based on management practices, the coalition threatened another lawsuit claiming that repainting the Boat House could damage the lake. The courts eventually sided with the Parks Commission and renovations continued.

Last year, the Parks Commission said it wanted to install seven acres of artificial-turf soccer fields at Golden Gate Park to save on maintenance expenses and attract more sporting events. A coalition of environmentalists objected to the plan, arguing the new fields would harm migratory patterns of birds living at the park. The new fields are currently undergoing environmental review and must be approved by San Francisco's Planning Board.

Brent Plater, executive director of the Wild Equities Institute, one of the plaintiffs in the suit against San Francisco over Sharp Park, says that with California reassessing its commitment to operating park lands, communities have an obligation to make their voices heard. At Sharp Park, he says "the community doesn't want another golf course. It wants a park."

Local officials say they are determined to keep Sharp Park a golf course. "This golf course serves a special service to the public and needs to remain in operation," says David Holland, assistant county manager for San Mateo County, which is pressing for a rapid resolution.

"The golf course has a lot of history and a lot of people aren't willing to let it go," says Steve Rhodes, city manager of Pacifica, which is working with San Mateo County to operate the park.

The conflict over Sharp Park, which spans 400 acres, dates to 2005. That year, the National Park Service issued a warning criticizing

San Francisco for pumping water off the golf course during winter flooding. The water had been used as a habitat by endangered species.

The warning, an official notice that the county was in danger of violating the Protected Species Act, forced the Parks Commission to leave portions of the course underwater.

The squabbling over Sharp Park intensified in December, when San Francisco Mayor Ed Lee vetoed a Board of Supervisors-backed proposal to negotiate with the National Park Service to operate Sharp Park.

Soon after Mr. Lee's veto, environmentalists filed a motion in December to halt play at the golf course. The motion was denied and play has continued.