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Francisco Reservoir plan touches on San Francisco parks and housing issues

By Examiner Staff

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Nathaniel Y. Downes/Special to the S.F. ExaminerThe struggle ensues on what to do with Francisco Reservoir sitting atop some of...

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For years, the nearly 4-acre abandoned Francisco Reservoir has been eyed for a new Russian Hill park.

But now, as the deal is on the verge of approval, questions remain about whether more open space in the neighborhood is the best course of action for San Francisco.

Some arguments draw on The City's housing crisis, saying the site, which has sweeping views of San Francisco Bay, should be developed. Others are worried that lower-income and more dense communities may lose out if such a large chunk of The City's Open Space Acquisition Fund is spent in an affluent neighborhood already rich with parkland.

But Supervisor Mark Farrell, whose district includes the reservoir, and a coalition of neighbors who have pledged millions of dollars for the project are celebrating the pending new park space, which is up for approval from the Recreation and Park Commission.

Phil Ginsburg, general manager of the Recreation and Park Department, and Mark Buell, president of the commission, have both praised the open-space project.

"It's time to strike and move forward," Buell said during the commission's capital committee hearing Wednesday. "We have no choice but to embrace this."

John Stewart, chairman of housing developer The John Stewart Company, has made the case that given the current housing climate, the site is ideal for up to 60 units of moderate-income housing. That would fall in line with Mayor Ed Lee's goal of building 30,000 units by 2020 to address increasing rents and evictions.

Stewart told The San Francisco Examiner last week that he met with Farrell in recent months to try to convince him of the housing potential to no avail. Nevertheless, he is not giving up. "Nobody wants housing in the neighborhood once they are in – what else is new?" he said.

Meanwhile, Supervisor Jane Kim is questioning the use of the open-space acquisition fund.

Rec and Park would acquire the site from the San Francisco Public Utilities Commission for the fair-market value of \$9.9 million, which would be paid back with interest over the next 12 years.

However, according to Kim's office, such a large expenditure could jeopardize Rec and Park's commitment to purchase up to three open-space parcels in Kim's District 6, which includes the densely populated Tenderloin and South of Market areas. The case is being made that District 6 should not lose out given that it has 0.6 acres of open space per resident compared to the 26 acres per resident in District 2, which includes the reservoir site.

Every year, The City invests about \$2 million of tax revenue into the open-space acquisition fund. According to a Recreation and Park Commission report, there is \$9.1 million in the fund, which would be reduced to \$5 million this year if payments started on the reservoir purchase along with an estimated \$3.9 million expenditure for a project at 900 Inness Ave. in the Bayview district. There is also an untold amount expected to be used for the purchase of two parks as part of the housing development of the former Schlage Lock site in Vistacion Valley.

“The reality here is this has been zoned open space for decades and we've been able to build consensus among many different neighborhood groups and citywide organizations around building a brand new park,” Farrell said of the reservoir site.

Farrell said he does not agree with Kim's concerns, noting the size of the fund. The fund, according to the commission report, would contain \$57.5 million by 2030 if no acquisitions were made.

The commission may vote on the deal as early as June 19.

Access to open space

<p>Parkland varies in abundance throughout The City.

District 6 (Tenderloin, SoMa, South Beach, Mission Bay, Rincon Hill, Treasure Island): 0.6 acres per resident

District 2 (Presidio, Marina, Cow Hollow, Pacific Heights, parts of Russian Hill): 26 acres per resident

Correction: This story was updated June 9 to correct the amount of parkland available per resident in District 6.

