

Conclave focuses on ailing lake

Meeting to set solutions for Lake Merced may follow

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The story of Lake Merced's receding water line found voice at City Hall last week, when a Board of Supervisors committee heard testimony about the lake's condition.

Initiated by Supervisor Tony Hall and held by the board's Neighborhood Services and Parks Committee, the hearing brought together representatives from

most of the public and private parties responsible for or interested in the lake, including the San Francisco Public Utilities Commission, the Daly City Water Department, the Lake Merced Task Force, and several golf courses and cemeteries.

Hall, who represents District 7 and who has positioned himself as the current board's champion of Lake Merced, said the hearing served both to remind his colleagues of the lake's needs and to demonstrate that the parties that were responsible for the lake's welfare were prepared to cooperate.

By all indications, he said, they had better.

"If they don't act together on this one, they'll all suffer," he

said. "The golf courses will be pumping salt water. Daly City won't have drinking water. The PUC will lose stature in the community."

One of the fundamental problems facing the lake is its steadily receding water level, which has fallen 10 feet in recent years and made the lake less accessible and attractive to recreational users. At the same time, the water temperature has been rising and the oxygen content has been decreasing, threatening the fish population.

The generally accepted explanation for the lake's deteriorating condition is that the Westside Basin Aquifer is being overtaxed.

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The lake depends on the aquifer — a natural subterranean storage basin for groundwater that runs beneath large parts of San Francisco and San Mateo counties — for replenishment. (The relationship between the lake and the aquifer is actually reciprocal, according to the PUC.)

California water law allows the owners of the land above the aquifer to draw groundwater from it, and many do.

"This is a large aquifer that a lot of people are using," said Michael Carlin, planning director for the San Francisco PUC.

In addition to the municipalities of San Francisco, Daly City, and San Bruno, for example, the Olympic, San Francisco, and Lake Merced golf courses and some cemeteries make demands on the aquifer. San Francisco pumps water from it for most of the parks on the west side of town, including Golden Gate Park, among other uses; Daly City draws on it for drinking water; and the golf clubs draw on it to water their fairways and greens.

Urbanization's toll

However, the demand on the aquifer is not the only reason for the lake's problems — urbanization is too, according to Carlin.

"By paving over paradise, you take away water from the lake," he said, noting that the lake's watershed has diminished by 90 percent since 1930 — from 6,000 acres to 600. This means that there is less undeveloped land through which rainwater can seep into the ground and replenish the aquifer.

"We have urbanized the lake and have basically been choking it off over time," he said.

Recycling facilities proposed

A major proposal for reducing reliance on the aquifer involves the construction of recycling facilities that would

treat used water, allowing it to be used again.

Both San Francisco and Daly City have considered building such facilities, which could supply water for irrigation of the parks and the golf courses, for example, but cost has stood in the way.

Daly City, which would supply the golf courses, doesn't want to build the facilities until it is certain that it would be able to recoup the costs. And the golf courses are reluctant to pay the cost of the recycled water, which is greater than the cost of pumping groundwater from the aquifer.

The city's Public Utilities Commission, which once had plans to build a wastewater-treatment plant near the lake, wouldn't be able to afford the \$200 million cost. And in light of the public water and sewer system's desperate need for a thorough renovation, a scaled-down version of the wastewater plant would probably still be too much.

"It's competing against all the other things we need to do," said Carlin.

Another option under consideration, according to Carlin, is the diversion of storm water from the Vista Grande Canal into the lake.

Pursuing top options

Hall said Friday that he was intending, "within a month, for sure," to gather "all the major players" for a meeting at which they would decide to pursue "two or three alternatives" for restoring the health of the lake. Most likely, these would include building a recycled-water-treatment plant, injecting water directly into the lake, and limiting the pumping of groundwater from the aquifer, he said.

California Trout, a conservation and fish advocacy group, has filed with several state and local agencies a petition that urges the governments to impose limits on the amount of groundwater that can be pumped from the lake.