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News - Wednesday, July 9, 2008

City rethinks emergency water reservoir

by Rory Brown

In a big win for residents of Menlo Park's Seminary Oaks neighborhood, the city has put on hold its plans to build an underground multi-million-gallon emergency water reservoir at Seminary Oaks Park.

At the July 1 City Council meeting, neighbors put an exclamation point on a tactical campaign against tearing up the three-acre park and cutting down neighborhood trees to make way for the reservoir, which would serve as an emergency water supply for the city.

Neighbors acknowledged that the city needs a backup water supply, but stressed that their neighborhood park isn't the right place for a reservoir, and the city needs to better engage the community to find the right spot for it.

"We all acknowledge the need for an emergency water supply," said Bill Evans, who lives on Santa Margarita Avenue and spoke on behalf of about 70 Seminary Oaks neighbors who attended the meeting. "What we look forward to is ... working collaboratively with the City Council, members of city staff and whoever else to arrive at a solution that suits the entire community and meets all of our needs."

City Manager Glen Rojas said staff has halted all work on the project, and will come back to the council in August with a list of other

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locations where the reservoir could be built, and suggestions on how the public can be better engaged in the process.

Springsing to action

In December 2005, council members gave the go-ahead to study the park — located near the intersection of Seminary Drive and Santa Monica Avenue, adjacent to St. Patrick's Seminary — as a site for a 3.5-million- to 6.7-million-gallon underground water reservoir.

But neighbors weren't formally notified of the reservoir plan until this May, when the city held a meeting about the proposal to bulldoze the existing fields and playground, cut down trees to make way for the reservoir, and build a permanent above-ground pumping station at the park.

Resident Kathy Switky said the lack of outreach on the city's part was "disappointing," as neighbors hadn't been asked for input on the reservoir plans.

"For many of us, the initial reaction was, 'Oh no! We love this park,'" Ms. Switky told The Almanac. "This park has really brought the entire community together."

Neighbors moved quickly to get caught up on the project, requesting meetings with city staff and council members, forming a "Friends of Seminary Oaks Park" group (which now represents about 100 households), and setting up a blog to keep the neighborhood posted about the project.

Public outreach

At the July 1 meeting, council members said the reservoir project is an example of the city needing to do a better job of reaching out to the public.

"There's been a lot of concern about public outreach on a number of different projects," said Mayor Andy Cohen. "Public entities and private entities — they just don't do the public outreach early enough. ... I want to see us do it better."

Kent Steffens, the acting assistant city manager, said city staff wanted to study the site before notifying neighbors of the possibility the park would be torn up to make way for the reservoir.

"Some members of the public feel that they should have been informed earlier on in the process, and I certainly sympathize with that," Mr. Steffens said. "But we also needed to collect data on the site so we would have information to give them."

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