



The Online Division of The Sacramento Bee

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Review stalls Bass Lake park

Questions over traffic, lights and asbestos delay an environmental report.

By Jim Downing -- Bee Staff Writer

Published 2:15 am PDT Sunday, May 22, 2005

Two summers ago, the new Bass Lake Regional Park seemed to be well on its way. An environmental review had begun, community meetings had been held, and the Cameron Park Community Services District had expressed its unanimous support for the 41-acre park.

But the project has turned out to be complicated, with tie-ins to a host of pressing issues in western El Dorado County, including traffic, growth, environmental preservation and naturally occurring asbestos.

As a result, the draft environmental impact report on the park plan remains a work in progress, more than two years after it was started.

"It's a very complicated EIR study," El Dorado County General Services Director Keith Leech said Thursday, noting that the study has had to weigh the potential impacts of increased traffic on Bass Lake Road, lighting for sports fields and changes to wetland areas.

He also said recent staffing changes within the county have slowed preparation of the report. Leech was appointed to his position March 29.

Leech declined to estimate when a public draft of the environmental report might be available. County Parks Project Coordinator Jon Vegna said Thursday that a "preliminary administrative review draft" of the report was circulating within county government.

In June, the county Board of Supervisors allocated \$564,000 of state park bond money to the project. Leech said that funding is on hold, pending completion of the environmental review.

As proposed, the regional park would feature a long list of recreational features, including two baseball fields, two soccer fields, two basketball courts, a disc golf course, walking trails, a 6,000-square-foot community center, an off-leash dog park, and a toddler play area.

At community meetings in the summer of 2003, many local residents had urged the county not to add lighting to the planned sports fields and to improve narrow Bass Lake Road before building the park.

"The road's been a real issue for everyone because it's been so unsafe," Kathy Prevost, president of the Bass Lake Action Committee, said Thursday.

Liz Diamond, the county's interim transportation director, said Friday that work to widen much of Bass Lake Road south of Bass Lake is under way and that a new road running north from near Bass Lake to Green Valley Road is planned.

Vegna said the environmental report will address various park design alternatives, such as with or without lighted sports fields, and that project-related traffic impacts would be mitigated if possible.

Prevost also said she was concerned about naturally occurring asbestos at the site.

A county-funded geologic study in 2002 found that the site's bedrock is largely serpentine, which

has the potential to contain asbestos. Traces of tremolite fibers were found in one of seven test pits dug for the study. Tremolite is a type of amphibole asbestos, which is considered the more toxic of the two major classes of asbestos.

Prevost's group submitted a formal petition to the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency in March 2004, asking the agency to conduct additional asbestos testing at the site.

The agency declined the request for two reasons, said Dan Meer, chief of Emergency Response, Planning and Assessment Branch at the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency Region 9.

First, he said, a preliminary review by the EPA indicated that the site was unlikely to be a source of significant asbestos exposure. Second, the county was already conducting a state-mandated environmental review.

"The EIR process is probably better suited to this (case)," he said, as opposed to an investigation under the auspices of federal Superfund laws more typically applied to the cleanup of hazardous waste sites.

County Environmental Management Director Jon Morgan was not available for comment Friday.

County regulations require the implementation of dust-control measures during and following construction in all areas where naturally occurring asbestos may exist.

Following the release of the Bass Lake Regional Park draft environmental report, members of the public will be given an opportunity to comment on the document.

The county then expects to prepare a final environmental impact report and send the park project to the Board of Supervisors for a vote.

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