

OPEN FORUM | *The Environment Near and Far*

Let's not 'fire away' at Lake Merced without the facts

By Dee Dee Workman, Dan Murphy, and Mondy Lariz

A's longtime advocates of restoring Lake Merced, which has suffered many years of neglect, we are compelled to respond to recent Chronicle pieces: "Fire away" (April 4, editorial) and "Gun club in crosshairs" (March 20). When it comes to the current controversy over the Pacific Rod & Gun Club, things aren't as simple as The Chronicle suggests.

The Lake Merced Task Force, which includes scores of organizations and agencies, has urged San Francisco to undertake the restoration of Lake Merced for nearly a decade. Many who care about this priceless ecological and recreational resource have come together with the San Francisco Public Utilities Commission, which owns the lake, to develop a Lake Merced Watershed Plan. The plan will address such issues as environmental health, recreational potential, land use and watershed protection at the lake.

It should be made clear that the Public Utilities Commission is not trying to arbitrarily evict the gun club from its shores. Through its comprehensive watershed planning process, the commission is simply trying to gauge public attitudes and priorities about different uses, including those at the gun club site.

This is not a question of banning or outlawing guns. Rather it is a pro-

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Comment on the Lake Merced Watershed Plan, go to the SFPUC Web site: links.sfgate.com/ZDCS

cess that asks: What is the most appropriate way to utilize this prime 14-acre lakefront site.

Currently the property is used fewer than 20 hours a week as a shooting range for about 300 gun club members. While the club has been generous in allowing occasional use of the property by others, the objective of the commission's exercise is to determine which uses of the property will meet the classic utilitarian test of providing "the greatest good for the greatest number."

Among the many uses being explored are a storage and launching facility for local high school and adult rowing programs; a facility for recreational boat rentals; a nature and environmental center; a children's play area; a restoration site for dune and wetland habitat; and a youth fishing program. Both public comment and rigorous criteria established for balancing multiple lake uses have generally favored these activities. The suggestion that there must be room for a compromise where the gun club would share the site with other uses raises serious questions.

As long as shooting continues to

be the focus of the club's program, only the rowing facility is even remotely likely to be compatible with it. The space is large enough to accommodate many uses, yet safety around live shooting is a concern no one seems to be talking about.

Imagine if a small child enjoying the nature center wanders off and is accidentally shot. Also issues of noise, residual impacts from lead and broken clay targets, and impacts to birds and wildlife have yet to be fully addressed. The watershed plan must answer the question of whether gun use is a sustainable practice at Lake Merced and if it can be compatible with competing uses without creating any environmental impacts on the lake.

We have worked collaboratively with members of the Gun Club and their affinity groups and respect their point of view. We also believe that the open public planning process led by the San Francisco Public Utilities Commission is the best way to balance the competing possibilities for the future of Lake Merced.

Dee Dee Workman is executive director of San Francisco Beautiful. Dan Murphy is a member of the Golden Gate Audubon Society Conservation Committee. Mondy Lariz is program director for California Trout. More information on the Lake Merced plan can be found at links.sfgate.com/ZDCS.