



County of San Diego

DEPARTMENT OF PARKS AND RECREATION

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TO: Supervisor Nathan Fletcher, Chair
Supervisor Nora Vargas, Vice Chair
Supervisor Joel Anderson
Supervisor Terra Lawson-Remer
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FROM: Brian Albright
Director, Department of Parks and Recreation

UPDATE ON PURSUING PARTNERSHIPS TO INCREASE RECREATIONAL ACCESS TO RESERVOIRS

On November 17, 2021, the County of San Diego Board of Supervisors unanimously voted to have County staff explore the feasibility and costs of providing operational support for the recreational use of reservoirs located in the unincorporated area that are managed by other public entities. This action called for County of San Diego Department of Parks and Recreation (DPR) staff to begin discussions with the public entities that manage the reservoirs. The Board directed DPR staff to report back within 180 days on potential partnership opportunities to help maximize the use of these recreational resources.

County Lakes/Reservoirs Operations

DPR currently operates Lake Morena County Park (District 2) in the unincorporated area of Campo which includes a reservoir and campground. The facility is owned by the City of San Diego and managed by DPR through a long-term lease. Recreational activities managed by DPR include fishing, boating, overnight camping, various day-use amenities and several miles of trails including a segment of the Pacific Crest Trail. Lake Morena provides recreational opportunities for outdoor enthusiasts 365 days per year. Until 2009, DPR also managed recreational access at Lake Jennings (District 2) in the unincorporated area of Lakeside, including camping, fishing, boating and hiking, through a long-term lease with Helix Water District. The County made substantial improvements to the campground after the 2003 Cedar Fire damaged it. When the County's lease expired in 2009, Helix Water District decided to take over recreational operations of the lake.

DPR also provides shore fishing at four County operated parks that include a lake or pond (Dos Picos Park in Ramona, Guajome Regional Park in Oceanside, Lindo Lake Park in Lakeside, and Sweetwater Regional Park in Bonita). These facilities also include recreational multi-use trails and all offer camping opportunities with the exception of Lindo Lake Park.



Non-County Managed Reservoirs in the Unincorporated Area

There are 12 reservoirs in the unincorporated area of the county that are currently owned by five different agencies other than the County of San Diego. In addition, some reservoirs contract out the recreational programming operations to a third party via a lease or license agreement. A detailed list of these reservoirs, including the owner agency and operator is outlined in the table below.

Reservoir	Agency/Operator	BOS District
Upper Otay	City of San Diego	1
Lower Otay	City of San Diego	1
Sweetwater	Sweetwater Authority	1
Barrett	City of San Diego	2
El Capitan	City of San Diego	2
Lake Cuyamaca	Helix Water District/Lake Cuyamaca Recreation and Park District	2
Lake Jennings	Helix Water District	2
Loveland	Sweetwater Authority	2
San Vincente	City of San Diego	2
Olivenhain	San Diego County Water Authority/Olivenhain Water District	3
Lake Henshaw	Vista Irrigation District/Lake Henshaw Resorts, Inc.	5
Lake Sutherland	City of San Diego	5

Providing a safe and reliable potable water supply to customers is the primary purpose of each reservoir. This can limit recreational opportunities at these reservoirs and require close monitoring to protect the water supply. Current recreation operations at these reservoirs are secondary activities that range in terms of the hours of operation and recreational opportunities. Most of the reservoirs operated by the City of San Diego have multiple recreational opportunities (e.g., shore fishing, boating, row boats, kayaks, but operate on a seasonal schedule with a minimum of one closure per month). For example, Lake Sutherland is open seasonally from March through September, three days per week and closed the third Friday of each month.

By comparison, Lake Jennings located within District 2 in the unincorporated area of Lakeside, operated by Helix Water District, provides full campground operations throughout the year and offers a variety of recreational opportunities including camping, fishing, boating and hiking, through a long-term lease with Helix Water District. However, access to shore fishing is limited to a portion of the reservoir and their existing boat fleet is not large enough to meet demand.

Some reservoirs in the unincorporated area are operated by a lessee or concessionaire. For example, Lake Henshaw is owned by the Vista Irrigation District, but operated via a concessionaire agreement with Lake Henshaw Resort, Inc. A summary of recreational operations and concessionaires at all 12 reservoirs is provided in Attachment A – Current Reservoir Operations Log.

Outreach

DPR engaged each of the five reservoir operators to gather data on current operations, gaps in services and potential partnership opportunities. A series of meetings were conducted from November 2021 through April 2022. In addition, DPR staff met with approximately 40 interested constituents and gathered input at the regularly scheduled public meetings of the Parks Advisory Committee and the Fish and Game Advisory

Commission. Lake and reservoir operators displayed various levels of interest in working with the County to potentially expand recreational opportunities and bridge gaps in existing services. Common themes included financial and operational challenges with expanding operating hours, recreational amenities (e.g., staffing, ongoing maintenance, and improvements), and procurement of equipment and supplies. Specific needs are identified below in the Feasibility/Possibilities section of the memo.

A survey (Attachment B) was also sent to a distribution list of over 13,500 interested stakeholders via email and shared through social media channels to gather input from the public and interested stakeholders. A total of 488 surveys were submitted. Results from the survey demonstrated that stakeholders are most interested in increased days and hours of operation, and facility improvements (e.g., campgrounds, bathrooms, picnic facilities, and playgrounds). In addition, El Capitan, San Vicente, Lower Otoy, Upper Otoy and Lake Jennings were identified as reservoirs that could benefit the most from improved access. Survey results also demonstrated that approximately 68% of respondents would support paying increased user fees to support improvements.

Feasibility/Possibilities

After extensive analysis, including information gathered from the operators, via the public survey, and through individual conversations with interested stakeholders, DPR staff identified a range of partnership opportunities that could help increase recreational access to reservoirs. Options include short-term (Tier 1), mid-term (Tier 2) and long-term (Tier 3) opportunities.

Below is a summary of those partnership opportunities and their associated tier level for the Board's consideration. The funding needs identified for opportunities in Tier 1 would provide the necessary resources for DPR to successfully implement these short-term options. If funding is provided, DPR staff would work with current reservoir operators and interested stakeholders to implement the changes next budget year (FY22/23). The mid and long-term recreational opportunities would require additional analysis, dialogue, and negotiations to gauge the level of interest from the public entities that currently manage the reservoirs. There may be a potential to expand recreational opportunities, however the public entities may decide not to pursue partnership opportunities with the County. In addition, a comprehensive outreach plan would be needed to ensure that the recreational opportunities being considered are aligned with the needs and interests of stakeholders.

Helix Water District - Lake Jennings

Various partnership opportunities were identified through meetings with Helix Water District staff. They range from one-time funding that would support the installation of a floating dock and replenishment of their boat fleet (Tier 1) to ongoing staff support (Tier 2) that would help expand shoreline fishing and boating throughout the week. In addition, a long-term opportunity (Tier 3) that would require additional analysis and discussion would transfer campground operations from Helix Water District back to DPR via a lease agreement. DPR previously operated the site via a lease with Helix Water District until December 31, 2008. On January 1, 2009, Helix Water District assumed operations after executing the termination clause of the lease agreement and has operated the facility since then. At this time, Helix Water District has not expressed a desire to turn over facility operations back to the County.

Vista Irrigation - Lake Henshaw

Lake Henshaw, owned by the Vista Irrigation District, currently operates via a concessionaire agreement with Lake Henshaw Resorts, Inc. which provides camping, day-use, and recreational opportunities seven days per week, year-round. Based on this and feedback provided by Vista Irrigation District, staff identified a potential partnership opportunity for the County to help expand trail access around the reservoir by assuming the ongoing operations of approximately a seven-mile portion of the California Riding and Hiking Trail (CRHT)

that traverses Vista Irrigation District property and is currently not open to the public (Tier 2). The CRHT is a proposed 3,000-mile, multi-use trail that extends from San Diego County to the Oregon Border. This would require additional analysis to identify a mechanism for acquiring the property and establishing an ongoing budget for operations.

City of San Diego - Lake Sutherland

Lake Sutherland is managed by the City of San Diego and operates on a seasonal basis (March – September). Hours of operation are Friday through Sunday, sunrise to sunset. Recreational opportunities include fishing and boating with water vessels allowed on Saturday and Sunday only. To increase recreational opportunities and access to the reservoir on a year-round basis, staff identified a long-term option (Tier 3) that would leverage existing DPR staff resources in the area and partnerships to operate the facility via a lease agreement with the City of San Diego similar to that of Lake Morena County Park. Additional analysis would be required to identify partnership opportunities among the various agencies and jurisdictions.

City of San Diego - All

The City of San Diego operates six reservoirs in the unincorporated area with varying hours of operations and recreational opportunities. Through conversations and meetings with City staff, it was shared that an ongoing cash payment to the City to support reservoir operations would be a potential partnership opportunity (Tier 2). The amount of \$120,000 in ongoing funding would provide an additional day of operations at the following reservoirs: Barrett, El Capitan, Otay, San Vicente, and Sutherland. The City shared that a five-year commitment from the County would be required for this option for a total of \$600,000.

Sweetwater Authority - Sweetwater Reservoir

Sweetwater Reservoir is operated by Sweetwater Authority and is open on a year-round basis with fishing hours of operation varying throughout the year. Recreational opportunities are limited to shoreline fishing and trail use to protect the potable water supply. Over the years, the two agencies have worked together to increase recreational opportunities around Sweetwater Reservoir through the development of the Sweetwater Loop Trail. Negotiations are currently underway for the remaining segments, 5 through 10, needed to complete the loop. An area of negotiation that could also increase recreational opportunities at the site would be for DPR to assume the operations of the South Trail (approximately five miles) that is currently maintained by Sweetwater Authority. This short-term (Tier 1) partnership opportunity would provide enhanced trail experiences for users and potentially make Sweetwater Authority more amenable to the current negotiations on the remaining segments which are ongoing.

Summary of Opportunities and Costs

The partnership opportunities that were identified by reservoir operators included one-time funding options to support the procurement of equipment and supplies, ongoing staffing to support expanded access and recreational opportunities, as well as ongoing cash payments to existing operators that would support additional positions and/or service and supply costs associated with the ongoing operations of these reservoirs long-term.

All these potential management and partnership opportunities are summarized in the matrix below.

Operator/ Reservoir	Opportunities	Funding	GPR and/ or OTO	Tier
Helix Water District – Lake Jennings	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Supplement existing staff with County staff to help expand recreational (fishing, boating) opportunities 	\$75,000 (2 Seasonal Park Attendants)	GPR	2
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Provide one-time funding to help replenish existing boat fleet 	\$20k - \$30k (15 – 20 new motors)	OTO	1
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Expand access to full lake through the installation of a floating dock 	\$200,000 (1 dock)	OTO	1
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Explore feasibility of campground operations coming back to the County via a lease agreement. 	Additional Analysis Needed		3
Vista Irrigation – Lake Henshaw	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Assume the maintenance and operation of the CA Hiking and Riding Trail on Vista Irrigation/Lake Henshaw Property 	\$90,000 (initial stewardship)	OTO	2
		\$50,000 (1 Seasonal Park Attendant and S&S)	GPR	
City of San Diego – Sutherland Reservoir	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Create trail connections to adjacent Cleveland National Forest Property 	Additional Analysis Needed		3
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Explore feasibility of entering into a lease agreement with the City of San Diego to take over reservoir operations to include camping and day-use opportunities (similar operations to Lake Morena County Park) 	Additional Analysis Needed		3

Operator/ Reservoir	Opportunities	Funding	GPR and/ or OTO	Tier
City of San Diego - All	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Annual payment to support operations at five reservoirs. Minimum commitment of five years. 	\$120,000 Annually (\$600,000 for five years)	GPR	2
Sweetwater Authority – Sweetwater Reservoir	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Assume maintenance and operation responsibilities of the Sweetwater Loop Trail (South Trail) 	\$37,518 (1 Seasonal Park Attendant)	GPR	1
All	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Provide one-time funding to procure equipment and supplies needed for current reservoir operations (e.g., vehicles, boats, tool, etc.) 	Additional Analysis Needed	OTO	2
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Annual payment to support ongoing operations including staffing 	Additional Analysis Needed	GPR	2

In addition to the opportunities listed above, there are current and proposed improvement projects in the unincorporated area that will provide increased recreational opportunities at Lake Jennings and Lindo Lake County Park. The Helix Water District is in the planning stages of an improvement project at Lake Jennings in the community of Lakeside. The proposed \$11,000,000 campground improvement project funded by the Helix Water District would include repairs to existing utility infrastructure, road improvements, the addition of a dog park and replacing existing campsites with new recreational amenities (i.e., adventure play area, splash pad and group picnic area). To the west of Lake Jennings, at Lindo Lake County Park, home to the only natural lake in the County of San Diego, phase one of a lake improvement project is underway. The restoration of the east basin of Lindo Lake will include several improvements that will allow for healthy water conditions and fishing year-round. Additional improvements to the surrounding landscape and habitat will also increase recreational opportunities at the site for hiking and bird watching enthusiasts.

Next Steps

Pending additional Board direction, DPR staff will gather data and engage interested stakeholders to determine the feasibility of implementing the opportunities identified in this memo. This can include developing a comprehensive outreach plan to gather the necessary feedback from the public to help shape staff recommendations moving forward.

If I can be of further assistance, please contact me at (858) 966-1301.

Respectfully,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'B. Albright', with a stylized, cursive script.

BRIAN ALBRIGHT

Director, Department of Parks and Recreation

Attachment A – Current Reservoir Operations Log

Attachment B – Survey Sample

cc: Clerk of the Board
Sarah Aghassi, DCAO, Land Use and Environment Group