

**COUNTY OF SAN DIEGO
BOARD OF SUPERVISORS - LAND USE
WEDNESDAY, OCTOBER 01, 2025**

MINUTE ORDER NO. 5

SUBJECT: ENHANCING OPERATIONAL AND RECREATIONAL CONDITIONS AT EL CAPITAN RESERVOIR (DISTRICTS: ALL)

OVERVIEW

For years, San Diego County residents have expressed growing interest in improved and consistent access to City of San Diego-owned reservoirs, many of which are located in the County's unincorporated communities. In response, the County of San Diego (County) has explored collaborative, cost-effective solutions to maintain and expand recreational access while safeguarding water quality.

The County originally entered into a partnership with the City of San Diego (City) in 1970 to operate the Lake Morena reservoir (Lake Morena). The agreement was amended in 1991 to its current model, where Lake Morena is owned by the City, but leased, operated, and maintained by the County Department of Parks and Recreation (DPR). Under this agreement, DPR has provided consistent recreational access at reduced costs and protected water quality, all while relieving the City of related operating expenses.

In a May 26, 2022, memorandum to the Board of Supervisors (Board) titled "Update on Pursuing Partnerships to Increase Recreational Access to Reservoirs," Lake Morena was cited as a successful long-term lease model that delivers year-round recreation opportunities while safeguarding water supply integrity. The memo highlights DPR's improvements to campsites, restrooms, and trails, as well as successful water quality testing in coordination with the City's Public Utilities Department.

Building on this success, stakeholders have identified El Capitan as another reservoir that could benefit from adopting an operation model similar to that of Lake Morena. This recommendation proposes up to a four-year pilot program for County DPR to coordinate with the City and assume responsibility for the maintenance and operations of recreation activities at the El Capitan reservoir, with the goal of expanding recreational access and opportunities for all San Diego County residents, while preserving high water quality for City usage. Up to \$600,000 annually would fund staffing, extended hours, and day-to-day maintenance of the El Capitan reservoir. The City would continue to perform dam operations and water quality monitoring and maintenance. County staff would conduct a facility assessment once the City has indicated its intent to proceed with an agreement.

RECOMMENDATION(S)

SUPERVISOR JOEL ANDERSON AND VICE CHAIR MONICA MONTGOMERY STEPPE

1. Find that the proposed actions to approve allocation of funds and direction to staff to explore the viability of entering into an agreement with the City of San Diego are not subject to review under the California Environmental Quality Act (CEQA) pursuant to CEQA Guidelines Section 15061(b)(3) because it can be seen with certainty that there is no possibility that the activity in question may have a significant effect on the environment.
2. Approve an allocation of up to \$600,000 per year for a total of \$2,400,000 beginning in Fiscal Year 2026-27 to the Department of Parks and Recreation to support up to a four-year pilot

project to operate and maintain recreation activities, including expanded hours and staffing costs, or potential facility improvements at El Capitan Reservoir.

3. Direct the Director, Department of General Services, to explore the viability of entering into an agreement with the City of San Diego for the operations and maintenance, or service enhancements at El Capitan Reservoir, including expanded service hours and staffing costs, or potential facility improvements, and report back to the Board of Supervisors (Board) in 120 days for an update or approval of such agreement, if required by law.
4. Approve an allocation of \$75,000 in Fiscal Year 2025-26 to backfill City of San Diego funding reductions at El Capitan Reservoir for the purpose of expanding access, consistent with the Board's emergency bridge funding provided last fiscal year and upon the City indicating its intent to proceed with an agreement, to also conduct a facility condition assessment.

EQUITY IMPACT STATEMENT

This action supports equitable access to high-quality recreational resources in the unincorporated and rural areas of San Diego County. Proposed reductions in reservoir access by the City of San Diego have disproportionately affected residents in East County who often lack alternative public amenities. By enabling County Parks and Recreation to assume management of El Capitan Reservoir's recreational amenities, this item directly improves access to affordable, family-friendly spaces for communities historically underserved by the region's urban park systems.

The project reflects strong public demand, with over 6,000 residents signing petitions opposing closures, and is supported by key stakeholders, including Friends of San Diego Lakes.

SUSTAINABILITY IMPACT STATEMENT

This item supports the County of San Diego's goal of fostering resilient, livable communities by promoting sustainable outdoor recreation. The Department of Parks and Recreation has a proven track record of protecting water quality and natural resources while expanding public access. Management of El Capitan Reservoir's recreational amenities under the Lake Morena model will reduce reliance on private concessionaires, encourage environmentally responsible infrastructure, and support long-term stewardship of open space and water resources.

FISCAL IMPACT

If approved, Recommendation 2 will result in an anticipated annual cost of \$566,000 to operate and maintain El Capitan Reservoir under the Lake Morena model, with approval requested for up to \$600,000 per year beginning in Fiscal Year 2026-27 to account for unanticipated staff, operational, or maintenance expenses. Annual revenues from recreational activities are projected to be between \$60,000 and \$65,000, reducing the net annual cost to approximately \$500,000. The funding source may include the reallocation of resources within the Department of Parks and Recreation. There will be no additional staff years.

Funds for the actions requested in Recommendation 3 to explore the viability of entering into an agreement with the City of San Diego are included in the Fiscal Year 2025-26 Operational Plan based on existing staff time in the Department of General Services funded by charges to client department. There will be no change in net General Fund cost and no additional staff years. There may be fiscal impacts associated with future related recommendations which staff would return to the Board for consideration and approval.

Funds for the actions requested in Recommendation 4 are included in the Fiscal Year 2025-26 Operational Plan in the Department of Parks and Recreation. If approved, this request will result in one-time cost of \$75,000 for Fiscal Year 2025-26 to conduct a facility condition assessment and to backfill City of San Diego operational funding reductions at El Capitan Reservoir, ensuring uninterrupted access through the end of the current fiscal year. The funding source is existing General Purpose Revenue. There will be no additional staff years.

BUSINESS IMPACT STATEMENT

The proposed County-managed operations at El Capitan Reservoir would support small business growth in the surrounding East County communities by increasing foot traffic, tourism, and demand for goods and services. According to stakeholder input collected by Friends of San Diego Lakes, small businesses, particularly bait and tackle shops, boat rental vendors, and local restaurants, experience significant economic loss when reservoir access is restricted. Consistent operations could restore seasonal revenue, attract recreation-based vendors, and enhance weekend tourism in Lakeside.

ACTION:

ON MOTION of Supervisor Anderson, seconded by Supervisor Montgomery Steppe, the Board of Supervisors took action as recommended.

AYES: Aguirre, Anderson, Lawson-Remer, Montgomery Steppe, Desmond

State of California)
County of San Diego)

I hereby certify that the foregoing is a full, true and correct copy of the Original entered in the Minutes of the Board of Supervisors.

ANDREW POTTER
Clerk of the Board of Supervisors



Signed
by Andrew Potter