



# COUNTY OF SAN DIEGO

## BOARD OF SUPERVISORS

1600 PACIFIC HIGHWAY, ROOM 335, SAN DIEGO, CALIFORNIA 92101-2470

### AGENDA ITEM

**DATE:** October 1, 2025

**05**

**TO:** Board of Supervisors

#### **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

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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.

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### **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.

### **ADVISORY BOARD STATEMENT**

N/A

### **BACKGROUND**

Over the past several years, San Diego County residents, particularly in the unincorporated and rural communities, have voiced growing concern over limited and inconsistent public access to regional reservoirs, many of which are located in the County's unincorporated communities. These reservoirs are more than just water storage facilities - they provide recreational opportunities for thousands of residents, including fishing, boating, hiking, picnicking, and camping. Ensuring equitable and reliable access to these outdoor spaces is essential to the County of San Diego's (County) vision of fostering health, well-being, and community connection for all residents.

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Recognizing the unique importance of these assets, on November 17, 2021, the Board of Supervisors (Board) unanimously directed County staff to explore the feasibility and cost of providing operational support for reservoirs located in the unincorporated area but managed by other public entities. This directive launched a comprehensive analysis by the County Department of Parks and Recreation (DPR) to identify partnership opportunities that would increase equitable recreational access for County residents.

In response, DPR returned on May 26, 2022, with a detailed memorandum analyzing recreational access, facility gaps, and governance structures. The report was based on 488 survey responses, outreach to stakeholders, and operational assessments across 12 reservoirs. Survey respondents prioritized improved access hours, restroom facilities, boat docks, and family-friendly amenities. Notably, El Capitan was highlighted as one of the highest priority sites for enhancement, given its location in Lakeside and accessibility for East County residents. The report also cited Lake Morena as a model lease between the County and the City of San Diego, demonstrating how County-led operations can provide consistent, high-quality recreational access while protecting water quality.

The success of Lake Morena, operated year-round by DPR under a 99-year lease with the City of San Diego, has demonstrated the County's capacity to deliver more consistent, affordable, and equitable recreational opportunities than existing concessionaire or City-operated models. Lake Morena is currently the only City-owned reservoir open daily with no monthly closures, and LAFCO's December 2024 analysis found its public fee structure to be significantly more affordable than those at privately managed sites like El Capitan.

Recognizing continued community demand for expanded access, in a follow-up action on March 15, 2023 (4), the Board again affirmed its commitment to this initiative, recommending that the County explore long-term funding solutions to enhance recreational access at regional reservoirs. One key proposal included a \$600,000 commitment over five years to increase operating days at key reservoirs, including El Capitan, Barrett, Otay, San Vicente, and Sutherland, as part of a broader County-led effort to improve access for all residents, regardless of jurisdiction. These sites were highlighted not for lack of operator capacity, but because of their potential to deliver regional recreation benefits if given consistent, community-driven service enhancements.

In Fiscal Year (FY) 2024-25, the County allocated \$59,000 in emergency bridge funding to prevent closures and maintain weekend operations at priority reservoirs, including El Capitan. While this emergency funding addressed the short term, it underscored the need for longer-term solutions that provide year-round, consistent recreational access. In FY 2025–26, the City of San Diego proposed \$889,080 in funding reductions to reservoir operations, which would have reduced public access at Lake Murray, Lake Miramar, El Capitan, Hodges, Sutherland and others.

El Capitan Reservoir, located in Lakeside and currently managed by a private concessionaire, remains a high-priority site for East County residents. Despite its popularity and capacity, the reservoir experiences frequent monthly closures, limited operating hours, and reliable boating services.

The recommended pilot project proposes a County-managed operational model at El Capitan, aligned with the successful Lake Morena framework. It would allow DPR to provide consistent

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public access and ensure operations reflect community priorities and environmental stewardship goals. The consistent feedback from our constituents, the clear direction from this Board, and the proven success of the Lake Morena model have laid a strong foundation for this pilot project at El Capitan Reservoir.

By assuming operational responsibilities at El Capitan, the County will not only alleviate costs currently borne by the City but also uphold its commitment to equitable access, public stewardship, and service delivery that is responsive to the community. This pilot initiative will not only address long-standing community concerns about access to the reservoir, but also ensure that one of the County's most treasured natural assets is available to all San Diegans.

**ENVIRONMENTAL STATEMENT**

The proposed action of allocating funds and directing staff to explore the viability of entering into an agreement with the City of San Diego (City) for the operation and maintenance of El Capitan Reservoir is 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. Any agreement for the County to operate and maintain El Capitan Reservoir would be comparable with the City's current operations and maintenance. The County would comply with CEQA and all applicable laws for any future projects undertaken at El Capitan Reservoir.

**LINKAGE TO THE COUNTY OF SAN DIEGO STRATEGIC PLAN**

This item supports the County of San Diego's 2025–2030 Strategic Plan through the Sustainable Environments/Thriving Communities, Strengthen Operational Excellence, and Equity Strategic Initiatives. The pilot project advances intergovernmental collaboration, expanding equitable access to outdoor recreation in underserved areas, and promotes responsible stewardship of water and open space resources.

By piloting a County-managed model at El Capitan Reservoir, this item enhances service delivery, reduces barriers to public amenities, and supports long-term environmental and recreational goals for communities across San Diego County.

Respectfully submitted,



JOEL ANDERSON  
Supervisor, Second District



MONICA MONTGOMERY STEPPE  
Supervisor, Fourth District

**ATTACHMENT(S)**

Attachment A: Department of Parks and Recreation Memorandum – Update on Pursuing Partnerships to Increase Recreational Access to Reservoirs (May 26, 2022)

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Attachment B: Friends of San Diego Lakes Memo on El Capitan Reservoir Community Priorities  
(August 2024)

Attachment C: Board Letter, November 17, 2021 – Direction to Explore County Support for  
Reservoir Operations

Attachment D: LAFCO Reservoir Access Fee Structure Comparison (December 2024)

Attachment E: Board Letter, March 15, 2023 – Reservoir Funding Recommendations

Attachment F: FY 2025–26 City of San Diego Budget Overview – Proposed Reservoir Operation  
Cuts