

Surf Cup Sports to take over polo fields lease

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The city has selected Surf Cup Sports as the winning proposal in the bid process to take over the lease of the San Diego Polo Fields. A new 25-year lease is currently being developed and will be approved by San Diego City Council in the next couple of months.

Jim Madaffer, representing Surf Cup Sports, updated the Carmel Valley Community Planning Board on its plans for the 80-acre property at its Feb. 24 meeting.

Surf signed a 28-year lease for the 114-acre property.

“Our central theme is stewardship for the land and giving back to the community,” said Madaffer, a former San Diego City Council member.

Surf’s “stewardship for the land” since the 2016 lease:

- Building an unpermitted concrete platform in the middle of the fields
- Pumping storm water into the San Dieguito River resulting in two Cease and Desist orders from the California Secretary of State
- Blocking wildlife corridors by installing chain-link fencing around the property
- Parking vehicles on and illegally grading adjacent sensitive wetlands resulting in Code Enforcement Violations
- Shining bright lights during bird nesting season and beyond
- Installing nets, exercise facilities, trailers, and a septic pit a few yards from the river
- Failing to even begin their obligation to restore the Coast to Crest trail

Surf’s “giving back to the community”:

- Surf has made no substantive contribution to the community nor has it allowed non-Surf teams to use the fields

San Diego obtained the polo club land in the early 1980s as part of a deal for development of the nearby community of Fairbanks Ranch. The city received a total of 616 acres, most of which was used for construction of the Fairbanks Ranch Country Club, which is also leased to the city through 2044. Although the original deed for the polo club property stated that there would be no active, non-community recreational uses, an updated memorandum of understanding does allow for active use sports.

The Grant Deed, attached as Exhibit B to the lease, in Section 4 a (iii) states that they agree to “active non-commercial uses not involving large assemblages of people.”

The San Diego Polo Club's 26-year lease expired in 2012 and since then has leased the property on a month-to-month basis. A request for proposals went out in May of 2015 — Surf Cup Sports was selected among the bids.

Surf Soccer Club was not the only interested group interested in leasing the fields. On November 14, 2014 the city was served with [another lawsuit](#) for violating the California Public Records Act.

With its proposal, Madaffer said Surf Soccer has committed to making several improvements for the better, including the “immediate benefit” of two new fields that will be open for community sports groups to use as scheduled through the Carmel Valley Recreation Council.

No fields were set aside for the community; the Carmel Valley Recreation Council does not work with Surf to schedule the use of any fields.

Surf Soccer has also pledged to help complete a major restoration and improvements to the Coast to Crest Trail along the property, which has been approved and never completed for a decade. Madaffer said Surf has met with the San Dieguito River Park and has agreed to give them the funds and allow the organization to build the trails in any way they want.

Restoration of that section of the Coast to Crest Trail is an obligation that runs with the land and is not dependent on the lease. Eight years on, Surf has failed to meet that obligation. The City has done nothing to move this forward.

The plan also features the development of a new equestrian arena and staging area toward the back of the property for community trail access as well as new public restrooms.

All equestrian facilities and activity have been removed from the property.

In addition, the plan includes the employment of professional traffic management staff, a change in on-property traffic flow and a new parking plan meant to alleviate local street traffic.

Local street traffic is a continuing issue especially on Via de la Valle, a dangerous County road. Traffic accidents are a regular occurrence at the entrance and exit to the property.

Madaffer said Surf Cup plans to adhere to the strict number of events a year outlined in the deed as well as the kind of events that are permitted—he said there will be no car shows, no lights or amplified sound. The deed language allows for 25 events a year and Madaffer said Surf will “probably be well under that” due to the health of the grass.

The grant deed allows for 25 days a year, not 25 events a year. Even so, Surf Sports has exceeded 25 sporting events a year including numerous loud concerts with floodlights. This is central to the April 2023 lawsuit filed by the Fairbanks Polo Club Homeowners Association against the City of San Diego for failing to enforce the use restriction.

Madaffer said letting the grass rest is their biggest issue as the health of the turf is important to maintain a world-class soccer facility.

The fields, and in particular, the back fields, are used on a daily basis unless rained out.

In their RFP, Surf Cup included that polo activities will continue on the site, whether with San Diego Polo Club or with another group.

“Polo will have a place here,” Madaffer said, noting as they are a youth sports group they are especially interested in educational polo lessons. “A decision will be made after the lease is final.”

Polo activities were discontinued almost immediately. Irrigation was installed that bars any future polo or horse activity.

“My issue with the Surf Cup has always been with poor traffic direction,” said Carmel Valley planning board member Christian Clews. “(Those directing traffic) always give first priority to event participants versus the normal traffic patterns.”

Madaffer said that Surf is aware that the traffic can be “nightmarish.” Toward the end of 2015, Surf employed a new ingress and egress on Via de la Valle to help eliminate traffic build-ups on El Camino Real.

“It’s made a huge difference,” Madaffer said, however several neighbors in attendance said that the difference was not for the better.

It took community members years to get Surf to hire traffic control. Even with occasional traffic control personnel on site, accidents happen on a regular basis.

“If you’re coming from the Flower Hill Mall area, good luck,” said resident Mike Scott.

Scott and other neighbors say the new traffic pattern brings up an “unbelievable” amount of dust and dirt to their homes and has added more signage and cones to Via de la Valle, as well as a significant amount of mud and dirt clots tracked out onto the road.

Some neighbors said they feel that the change to allow recreational sports use was a “huge betrayal” of public trust, when the land was meant to be passive, open space.

Neighbors complained that even though it’s not counted as an “event,” regular soccer practices can bring up to 100 cars parked at the fields on a week day. Soccer activity also brings 7 a.m. whistles and practices that last well after dark.

“It’s children playing,” Madaffer said. “I’m sorry you have to live next to children playing.”

Madaffer said that 95 percent of the time, the place is quiet and open and Surf provides maintenance to the 60 acres at no cost to the taxpayers. They are also promising continued public access for trail use, equestrians, bird watchers in new bird blinds or to just go out and throw a Frisbee on the grass when soccer is not in play.

Surf regularly closes the 114-acre property and trails to the community.

“We want to be an active part of the community and we want to hear any concerns that you have,” Madaffer said. “We will commit to coming back to this planning group as often as you want us.

Surf has directed any community concern or complaint to be dealt with directly through the City of San Diego. The City of San Diego created an unmanned email address for community concerns. Emails are not returned.

“We want to work with everybody and the neighbors. We want to be sensitive to the concerns, we

want to be sensitive to traffic, we want to be sensitive to noise, we want to be sensitive to the mud, all of the issues that you've talked about. We don't want problems so if there is a problem we want to fix it and make it better."

Since 2016, any outreach from neighbors or the community has been directed to the City of San Diego. Surf officials have refused to be a good neighbor or engage in open dialogue.