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No finish line in sight in dispute over Crystal Springs Cross Country Course

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A long-running dispute involving a group of Belmont neighbors who are upset with the size and frequency of cross country events at the Crystal Springs Cross Country Course did not appear closer to resolution Tuesday, after the matter was discussed at the San Francisco Public Utilities Commission (SFPUC) meeting.

Ahead of the meeting, Belmont Mayor Charles Stone, a native San Matean who trained at

Crystal Springs, located at 2600 Hallmark Dr., **publicly sounded an alarm** about language in a SFPUC memo indicating the commission, which manages the land, planned to “take steps to revoke” the license for cross country events if the dispute between cross country stakeholders and members of the Belmont Heights Civic Improvement Association (BHCIA) isn’t resolved by the end of the calendar year.

During the meeting, however, three of the five SFPUC Commissioners expressed they would not support revoking the permit due solely to opposition by the group of neighbors, saying they hoped for a resolution before the SFPUC reports back on the matter in January.

Members of the BHCIA, which represents neighbors living near the watershed, have been calling for several years for limits on meets and participants, saying too many runners and spectators attend the events and negatively impact traffic, parking, fire safety and the watershed.

The SFPUC describes cross country as compatible use in the watershed and adds that the sport has not been found to be environmentally problematic. But the agency, which views the matter as a neighborhood dispute, not one that impacts the watershed, is also in the process of updating the license that enables cross country training and competition at Crystal Springs and wants the BHCIA and cross country stakeholders to come to agreement on the future of the sport there.

Cross country stakeholders have made concessions, including reducing events from 33 in Fall 2019 to 20 in Fall 2021. Youth races typically occur during the Fall season. Still, an agreement between the BHCIA and cross country stakeholders wasn’t reached even after a third party mediator was called in to facilitate the negotiations.

Mayor Stone, who described the Crystal Springs course as a valuable community resource that provides equitable access to student athletes throughout the county and beyond, said a “very small group of residents” shouldn’t get to dictate use of a public resource.

“The suggestion of revoking the permit would be a solution that would, quite literally, cater to a handful of people of privilege who do not even speak for their entire group and definitely do not speak for their neighborhood, city, or larger mid-Peninsula community,” Stone said. “It would certainly ignore the thousands of past, present, and future cross-country team members who definitely want this resource to remain in place, as is.”

The SFPUC issued a license to the San Mateo County Community College District (SMCCCD) to operate the cross country course in the early 1970s. For most of those years, the College of San Mateo managed it as its “home course,” but in recent years the college has minimally used Crystal Springs. Meanwhile, usage by high school and middle school programs has increased, according to SMCCCD.



In Fall 2019, the College of San Mateo announced it planned to terminate its lease due to the college's minimal use of the course, as well as the staff time needed to manage it and to respond to the neighbor complaints. But the college later reversed that decision following pushback from community members and cross country stakeholders who were concerned the course would be closed. The College has since contracted with a third party to manage and schedule events on the course for high school and middle school use, the District said.

Members of the BHCIA, however, have been pressuring the SMCCCD and SFPUC to further limit the size and frequency of cross country meets. During public comment at the SFPUC meeting Thursday, a neighbor who did not identify herself said she wants kids to keep running there, but said the events have grown over the last two decades not just in terms of runners but also in spectators who "arrive by the thousands, all in cars." She added the course has become a "sporting entertainment venue." The BHCIA has [posted charts](#) it claims shows significant growth in use of the course since 2007.

According to SMCCCD, larger cross country meets range between 1,000 to 2,000 athletes and spectators, while the largest of all, the Central Coast Section Championship, typically draws about 3,000 athletes and spectators.

The lack of an agreement between neighbors and cross country advocates places the SFPUC in a difficult position while it seeks to update the license with "some 21st Century measures in it," according to Tim Ramirez, who heads the SFPUC's Division of Natural Resources within the Water Enterprise. The agency "needs to make sure that existing use [in the watershed] then is described now, and that it's the same," Ramirez said, adding a full environmental review will be done. Ramirez said the agency is not aware of existing activities that has been problematic on the watershed. But the SFPUC wants the disagreement between the BHCIA and cross country stakeholders to be settled prior to establishing and issuing an updated license to the SMCCCD.

In the memo to the agenda of Tuesday's meeting, the SFPUC indicated it would again try to convince the BHCIA, SMCCCD and cross country stakeholders to come to common ground.

"If they can't work out the issues with the other parties, we are really kind of at a loss at how we make it work," said SFPUC Assistant General Manager Shawn Ritchie.

SFPUC Commissioner Ed Harrington said he wouldn't want to revoke the permit based solely upon complaints by "a relatively small group."

"I think it's a valuable thing that happens there and I would like to see it continue to happen," Harrington said about the cross country tradition.

Newsha Ajami, vice president on the Commission, also voiced support for continuing cross country use in the watershed, noting the need to come to agreement on how to mitigate

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traffic impacts in the neighborhood. Commissioner Aaron Moran added that he doesn't want the commission to provide a veto to one party or the other in the debate. "Which is the effect of saying we'll terminate the permit if you can't come to agreement," Moran said. "We need to be careful about how we modulate our position."

Moran said he planned to attend an upcoming cross country meet to observe the impacts.

Commissioner Tim Paulson said the commission looks forward to hearing an update in January 2022 from SFPUC staff about the status.

Photo courtesy of a [petition](#) advocating against potential closure of Crystal Springs Cross Country Course.

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