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Use of popular Crystal Springs Cross Country Course gets support from Belmont

By Curtis Driscoll Daily Journal staff
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To support the continued use of the treasured Crystal Springs Cross Country Course amid concerns about its leasing future, the Belmont City Council will pass a resolution stating its support of maintaining it for public use.

“It’s a true community asset. It’s actually considered one of the premier cross country courses in the nation, and definitely, one of the best in the state, if not the best,” Mayor Charles Stone said.

The Belmont City Council will bring a resolution next meeting supporting the Crystal Springs Cross Country Course remaining in public use amid some neighborhood concerns. Some residents in the Belmont Heights neighborhood close to the course raised concerns about

parking, traffic, noise and the environment during high school and middle school cross-country meets. The popular course is just west of Belmont at the State Route 92 and Interstate 280 interchange and is used extensively from early September to late November during the cross country season. Car access is along Hallmark Drive, with the three major entrances all accessed from Belmont streets. Of particular concern are big cross country events like the Central Coast Section and Peninsula Athletic League meets.

The San Mateo County Community College District has been granted a license to operate the cross country course by the San Francisco Public Utilities Commission, which owns the land.

A city staff report noted SFPUC has said a majority of trustees do not feel the license granting the district permission to operate the cross country course should be revoked, but a resolution addressing Belmont Heights resident concerns must be reached by year's end. An Oct. 19 letter to the SFPUC board members from Tim Ramirez, division manager with Natural Resources and Lands Management, said that "if an agreement is not reached among SMCCCD and the various stakeholders by the end of this calendar year, then we will take steps to revoke the existing license."

Idil Bereket, communications manager with SFPUC, said by email Thursday there has been no update since the Oct. 26 commission meeting, which included the Oct. 19 memo from staff. SFPUC is working on a revised license to share with the College of San Mateo and the community by January based on feedback and input received. Staff plans to provide the commission with a status update in January and, based on that, a proposed license for the commission to consider. She noted the ideal scenario is to find the middle ground that ensures everyone involved supports the terms of the new license.

Discussions at an SMCCCD trustee meeting in August and September led to some concessions. However, not all issues with residents have been resolved. Some mitigation suggestions include reducing the number and size of cross country meets to between 20 and 25 a year, with three to five large meets annually and no more than five Saturday meets. Additional mitigation measures include more outreach and response by Belmont police and an offer by SMCCCD for remote parking at the College of San Mateo. The city noted many Belmont residents, including people in Belmont Heights, want sports to continue at the site.

Stone told the Belmont council Tuesday that he attended an SFPUC meeting discussing the subject. Based on his understanding, SFPUC commissioners had not given direction to staff to take steps to close it and were surprised there were discussions about pulling the permit.

"I feel fairly certain that that commission is not looking to close this course now, which is

good, but they did seem interested in what's going on in the city," he said.

Stone said while there is neighborhood impact during meet days, most people he spoke with have favored not tinkering with the races. He also noted there were around 44% fewer races this year than a decade ago.

Vice Mayor Julia Mates pointed out the neighborhood is roughly the same age as the course and has been going on longer than some people have lived in the neighborhood.

"It's really to me no different than folks who live near schools who are upset about some of the traffic they see during the pickup and dropoff hours. The schools have been there long before some of these people moved in," Mates said.

Councilmember Warren Lieberman supported keeping the course open for future generations.

"It's not to minimize the concerns of the folks, but so far, I haven't heard a whole lot that says it would justify closing this down or anything near that," Lieberman said.

Stone said keeping the course open was important for equity for all kids.

"The folks around here are mostly pretty affluent, the kids who get to come here and run from Stockton and Fresno get to use a pretty incredible regional treasure, and I would be really troubled if it went away for them," Stone said.

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