

Contention Basin: The Aftermath of Memorial Park

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2016

In the November elections, San Anselmo voters decided to block the use of Memorial Park as a flood control detention basin, dealing a major blow to our watershed's flood control program. The ballot measure brought by a citizen initiative indicated that the public is paying attention, is engaged in and discussing flood control, but like our parent's generation's experience with the concrete channel in Kentfield, this has helped us identify what we do not want—or, maybe, how we do not want to go about the process. What we can agree upon for flood management remains to be seen.

The idea of using Memorial Park as a detention basin originated in the County Flood Control District's Capital Improvement Plan, or CIP. The CIP was an engineering exercise developed by consultants and conceptually based on trying to keep the 2005 flood in its banks by using a combination of increased channel capacity and several detention basins. In 2012 the county received a \$7.7 million grant from the state to retrofit Phoenix Lake as a detention basin. When that same grant program became available the following year, the Town of San Anselmo hired the same consultants to put an application together.

Once the grant was awarded people began to digest the information in the grant application and it became clear what a massive project we had signed up for. The cost estimate had almost tripled, it was realized what a large volume of storage was described, and none of the design renderings were very appealing. During this time the project stalled. Proponents of the project probably thought more outreach was needed, but nothing seemed to make it sound better. It was often suggested that if consultants could be hired to do CEQA review, with its required environmental studies, they would find a more palatable configuration. The lack of an early CEQA process created a void of information that was filled by project opponents.

Members of the public had expressed doubts and concerns about a Memorial Park detention basin beginning even before the grant application; people called it a boondoggle, ugly, inconvenient. Whatever the reasons were at first, as the concerns and questions of these individuals routinely went unanswered, the frustrated residents unified themselves and ultimately mounted a successful campaign to stop the project.

When the vote was held in November, 57% of 4,250 voters said no to the project, while 43% chose to have another vote after the environmental studies.

In the aftermath of this decision, town and county officials are trying to figure out if the grant funds can be applied to another project. Any other project would have to provide the same benefits and cost about the same amount of money. The opportunity may exist to fund another project.

Perhaps flood control would get more traction with residents as a series of small and medium-sized projects, rather than one large one. Opening and restoring the channel should happen incrementally, but also raising houses, protecting property, and lowering roads to convey water would be a gracious way of acquiescing to life in a floodplain.



The potential use of 8-acre Memorial Park in San Anselmo as dual use park and floodwater detention basin was nixed by voters. Photo by Charles Kennard

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