The North County Times - Californian

Increase would be done as San Marcos turns the site into a park

SAN MARCOS: City looking at raising South Lake's water level

ANDREA MOSS - amoss@nctimes.com | Posted: Sunday, August 23, 2009 3:50 pm

NOTE TO DESK: This story has art AND a locator map, slugged s.Southlake

City officials are exploring the idea of raising the water level at South Lake as part of its development into a major recreation area.

Set in the hills west of Twin Oaks Valley Road and south of Highway 78, the manmade lake was a drinking water reservoir until 1984.

The Vallecitos Water District, which owns South Lake and uses it only to store emergency water now, agreed in 2005 to lease the lake to the city for up to 75 years, at a cost of $1 per year.

The site is currently fenced, gated and closed to the public.

That would change under a master plan that the city's Community Services Commission approved in February. The proposal calls for the city to turn the lake into a 53-acre park offering fishing, boating, hiking and other outdoor activities.

The $6 million park would include two fishing docks, a boat-rental concession with a boat ramp, an outdoor amphitheater, picnic areas, a children's play area, a dog run, restrooms, a caretaker apartment and parking.

On Thursday, San Marcos' community services director Craig Sargent-Beach said the question of whether the lake's water level should be raised came up recently during discussions with environmental agencies that must OK the plan before the park can be built.

Estimating the lake's current depth at 20 to 25 feet, he said raising the water level by 10 feet would make it easier to keep the lake deep enough for the docks, the ramp and any boating programs the city might offer at the site.

Without the additional water, evaporation could make the lake too shallow during years of below-normal rainfall, Sargent-Beach said.

"Usually, there's a 4-foot change per year (due to evaporation)," he said. "So if we don't make back that 48 inches of evaporation with our rainfall ... you end up having the water level drop from season to season and summer to summer."

If the city does decide to raise the water level, it has several options for doing so. They include digging a well, from which water could be pumped into the lake, or waiting for a winter of heavy rain to fill the reservoir naturally.

Sargent-Beach said the city is leaning toward the natural approach because it would save San Marcos from having to do the habitat mitigation that would be required if the water level were raised artificially.

Community Services Commission Chairwoman Kathleen Kildoo could not be reached last week.

Sargent-Beach said time is in the city's favor, though.

"We don't anticipate having the park completed and open until winter 2011," the community services director said. "And so we have two more winter seasons before we would have to really make a full-on decision."

Call staff writer Andrea Moss at 760-739-6654.