Poisonous fate awaits historic Mt. Davidson forest
Supervisors ignore neighbors’ pleas regarding toxic herbicides, park access

by Jacque Proctor

In 1927, after a multi-year campaign by residents, the SF Board of Supervisors approved the purchase of 20 acres of Adolph Sutro’s forest on Mt. Davidson “for a public park serving the needs of the West of Twin Peaks district and also serving as a recreation center and forest playground for the whole city. The acquisition will preserve for all time the beautiful tree covered slopes of the mountain as an attractive scenic landmark in the city.”

Nearly a century later, the Board of Supervisors decided on Feb. 28 that the purpose of the park should be changed from recreation to preservation of prolific native shrubs and grasses, such as buckwheat and reed grasses.

Despite unanimous opposition of 20 westside neighborhood associations, thousands of petition signatures, hundreds of phone calls and letters, and nearly a decade of countless hours of effort by Mt. Davidson Park neighbors and users, the Recreation and Park Department (RPD) plan to remove the center one-third of the historic forest, restrict access and use toxic herbicides to increase the prairie landscape in the park from 10 to 20 acres (more than half of the current 38-acre park) was given the go-ahead by the Board of Supervisors.

The San Francisco Forest Alliance (SFFA), with support from the West of Twin Peaks Central Council, Miraloma Park Improvement Club, and other community organizations, appealed the approval of the Environmental Impact Report (EIR) for the Natural Resource Areas Management Plan (NRAMP) by the Planning and Recreation Commission on Dec. 15, 2016.

Over 40 appeal supporters rallied outside City Hall before the hearing with banners, music and chants. Many of those attending the rally were unable to stay for the Board meeting after the 3 p.m. meeting time was postponed more than two hours.

The SFFA appeal called for rejection of the RPD’s EIR for the Plan on the grounds that it failed to identify the negative impacts: engaging in environmentally destructive large-scale forest removal, ongoing dangerous applications of highly toxic herbicides, and other overly aggressive management operations in wilderness areas and public parks.

SFFA maintained that such practices would be devastating to wildlife, release large amounts of greenhouse gases, create serious new mudslide dangers, and be unacceptably hazardous to human and animal health.

At the Board hearing, Tom Borden, representing SFFA, argued for the appeal saying, “This EIR is deeply flawed and must be flatly rejected and completely redone. It pretends implementing the plan will not increase the use of incredibly hazardous herbicides,” he said.

“The climate assessment numbers are completely wrong and don’t account for huge increases in greenhouse emissions from mass removals of mature trees and forests and the disturbance of their soils.

“It doesn’t adequately assess mudslide and erosion dangers from all of this tree cutting and it doesn’t address RPD’s plan to close off public access to vast areas of our parks,” Borden emphatically stated.

“If this report is accepted, it will allow RPD to kill thousands of healthy trees without accountability, close our parkland to public access, and signal acceptance that the most toxic herbicides will be sprayed in our parks in perpetuity.”

Supervisors acknowledged the unpopularity of this plan with one saying they had received more comments and calls on this issue than any other. Several also expressed concern about the herbicide use, but only District 7 Supervisor Norman Yee voted in favor of the appeal.

The other supervisors appeared to find no political advantage to oppose those who benefit financially from supporting native plant restoration — such as SF Parks Alliance, SPUR and Nature in the City.

They accepted placating comments from City staff such as more public review being offered for any project implementation on Mt. Davidson for trail restoration or forest clearing. However, previous tree clearing for trail restoration projects, such as the one in Glen Canyon, resulted in the RPD staff plan to take down hundreds of trees being fully implemented despite significant public testimony to the contrary.

In response to the dangers from Round-up and other carcinogenic herbicides used to kill oaks in the parks, City staffer Lisa Wayne said that “eating bacon has the same risk factor as Roundup.”

Rec & Park Director Phil Ginsburg stated that “wild places do not take care of themselves” — which is true about native plant restoration areas.

However, when it comes to sustainability, scientific testimony submitted by UC Berkeley Forestry Professor, Dr. Joe McBride, indicated that Mt. Davidson’s forest is thriving, does not poison the soil, and supports a plant understory that is more biodiverse than the prairie landscape proposed in the plan.

McBride recommended that the forest be left wild and allowed to remain as a thick grove that resists the severe winds on the northwest slope. Evidence of this fact has been seen this winter where strong winds and record rainfall has caused hundreds of street and park trees to fail in San Francisco, but only one small tree fell in a landslide on the edge of Mt. Davidson Park.

What is also clear from the huge outcry of West of Twin Peaks residents is that RPD will have its every move scrutinized in the future as neighbors look to ensure preservation of the forest playground as Adolph Sutro intended when he planted it as a gift for San Franciscans: a place to hike and be surrounded by beautiful tall trees and lush greenery – an oasis for rejuvenation amidst what is now the second densest city in America.