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A new look for Sly Park

The recreational area has outgrown its facilities.

By Cathy Locke - Bee Staff Writer

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A preliminary plan envisions new parking lots, cabins and improved trails and campgrounds in the 2,000-acre Sly Park Recreation Area, one of the most popular recreational areas in the Sacramento region.

The El Dorado County park, 17 miles east of Placerville, includes a 640-acre lake and averages about 190,000 visitors a year.

The board of the El Dorado Irrigation District, which owns the park, received an update last week on the master plan for developing recreational facilities at Sly Park over the next 20 years.

The park is more than 50 years old and wasn't built to handle the large vehicles and the number of visitors now drawn to the lake, campgrounds and trails, Recreation Director Don Pearson said.

"Every campground and every day-use area needs some major redevelopment," he said.

A number of improvements are needed for public and employee safety, Pearson said, adding that the proposed plan calls for adding up to eight staff members. The Sly Park staff currently consists of seven year-round and 20 seasonal employees.

People want more recreational options and want to use park facilities longer than the district currently allows, Pearson said.

"They are loving that park to death," he said.

Staff members said the number of visitors was lower than usual in 2006 because of the wet spring and disruption of normal operations in the fall for a water line replacement project. They reported 59,235 day visitors, 74,007 campers and 6,704 boats used the park during the past year.

Components of the master plan would be implemented in phases, as funding becomes available. Among those proposed within the first three years are campground improvements, including new campsite design with improved access, water service and road improvements.

The district is installing a water main, Pearson noted, but the areas of the park that will

receive water service have not been decided.

The plan calls for campsites tailored to new markets.

Current campsites are considered rather primitive, Pearson said, noting that they lack water and electrical hookups. Some people would prefer an even more primitive experience, he said, while others have expressed interest in amenities including rustic cabins or yurts, as well as tent platforms.

Cabins and yurts -- circular tents on a framework of poles -- have proved popular at parks in the Northwest, Pearson said.

"If we had them, they probably would be occupied," he said.

Wood platforms for tents would help discourage people from pitching tents in environmentally sensitive areas, he said.

New parking lots at the marina and at the site of the lake's second dam also are proposed within the first three years.

Pearson said the district has received a \$489,000 grant from the state Department of Boating and Waterways to construct the parking lots. Because of changes in the location and scope of the projects since the grant was awarded, an additional \$120,000 in district capital improvement funds will be needed to cover the costs, he said.

The district also is considering opportunities for collaboration.

Representatives of the Sugarloaf Foundation, which sponsors the Sugarloaf Fine Arts Camp, have discussed a potential agreement that would allow the organization to provide facilities at Sly Park and make them available to other youth groups, as well.

Sugarloaf, which offers summer programs for music, drama and visual arts students in El Dorado County, proposes to use the Sly Park center two weeks each year. But to make the operation self-sustaining, Pearson said, the facility would have to be rented out eight months of the year.

Projects proposed in later phases of the master plan include moving the entry kiosk further into the park to prevent traffic from backing up on Sly Park Road, a new mountain bike trail and a dog park.

Designating an area for dogs, Pearson said, would help keep the animals away from the lake.

Director George Osborne suggested staff members also seek ways to maximize use of boat slips. Many people who rent berths, he said, use them only a few weeks a year.

Pearson said staff members are contacting individuals who rent berths to determine when those spaces might be available to others. The district could reimburse a portion of the annual rental fee while providing more efficient use of its facilities and generating additional revenue.

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