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Letter to the Editor - The Political Circus at Mission Peak

The top-rated and most popular attraction in Fremont is Mission Peak Regional Preserve, which opened in 1978. Since then, the East Bay Regional Park District (EBRPD) has made substantial investments to maintain the trails, provide drinking water and toilets, and protect public safety.

In 2014, the city of Fremont and the district coordinated a PR campaign against the park, to limit visitors. The campaign included newspapers, magazines, social media, and TV. The district and city met behind closed doors with a local gated community, to air their complaints about people flocking to the park, parking congestion and noise. The locals wanted to restrict access at Stanford Ave, while claiming to be park visitors and nature lovers.

The district delayed the park opening on a temporary / interim basis, from 5:00 a.m. to 6:30 a.m. In 2016, the city restricted parking on local streets, and gave free permits to residents. To lend muscle to the crackdown, thousands of tickets for parking and curfew violations were handed out by district and city police. Parking on nearby streets such as Weibel Dr and Stanford Ave was effectively privatized, which slashed park visitors by one third.

In 2016, to address the unstinting complaints from the neighborhood, the park district Board authorized 300 new parking spaces inside the park and allocated $1.6 million for design and permitting. The district also approved an Environmental Impact Report, and the city council wrote a letter of support. But then, an anti-park faction of locals filed suit against EBRPD, to block the expansion on environmental grounds. In 2017, a park district spokesperson told the East Bay Times that, "We're still trying to do the right thing despite the lawsuit … to actually build a parking lot that would accommodate the majority of the use on the mountain." The suit was settled in 2018, clearing the path to expand parking. But since then, the park district has done nothing.

The site of the new parking lot is leased from the city, and the lease will expire in July 2020. At the same time, the temporary parking permits are slated to expire. In the past, leases were renegotiated routinely, behind closed doors. This time, the city could put the renegotiation up for debate at public meetings.

The city could stage another political circus, like the recent debacle surrounding the Homeless Navigation Center.

The stated mission of the park district is to provide access to nature for all. The park district manages many parks in Fremont, including Quarry Lakes, Vargas Plateau, Ardenwood, Coyote Hills, and the Alameda Creek Trail. Unlike the city, the district embraces diverse, under-served communities across the Bay Area and welcomes visitors from around the world. If the city strong-arms the park district with excessive demands, the city might have to manage the park. But the city is not staffed or equipped to run a hugely popular, regional park. The city has no policy to provide equal access to parks, nor does it recognize the principle of environmental justice for under-served communities. In fact, the city has prioritized access for a few privileged residents, who clamor for quietude through the exclusion of outsiders. Our city council has put the wants of a few ahead of the needs of the city.

The expiration of the ordinance to restrict parking, and the renewal of the lease, will benefit the residents of Fremont. These actions will also benefit visitors and businesses that cater to visitors in Mission San Jose and Warm Springs. To stabilize Mission Peak, the district should construct the new staging area as directed by its Board, and normalize park hours.

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