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# Sunol: \$20 million project near water temple is on hold

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*The 1910 Sunol Water Temple designed by renowned architect Willis Polk and modeled after the Temple of Vesta in Tivoli, Italy is photographed in Sunol, Calif., on Thursday, March 23, 2017. The San Francisco Public Utilities Commission is planning a watershed center with exhibits on Alameda Creek watershed natural resources, local history and culture, plus a community meeting room and a native*

*plants garden on an adjacent site. (Anda Chu/Bay Area News Group)*


SUNOL — People in this quirky hamlet have looked forward for years to a planned Alameda Creek watershed center that would provide a central public place to visit and play, as well as greater access to Sunol Water Temple, a 60-foot-tall monument.

The \$20 million plan for the center is on hold, though, because of doubts that the San Francisco Public Utilities Commission can afford to build the center that was carefully planned over years by water officials and community residents.

The center is planned just east of the water temple on water department land southwest of the intersection of Interstate 680 and Highway 84 in Sunol, a town of some 900 people.

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Officials said they haven't abandoned the project, but are trying to sort out whether they can afford to build the center as planned, or will have to scale back the building.

“I’m disappointed by the delay,” said longtime Sunol resident Irv Tiessen. “This center would provide a focus to our town that doesn’t have a central place to go — unless you count the local dining establishment that dispenses beer in the bar by lifting the hind leg of Bosco the dog.”

In keeping with Sunol’s offbeat and independent-minded character, a local restaurant uses a stuffed replica of Bosco, a black Labrador once elected as the town mayor, to dispense beer.

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Tiessen said he is cautiously optimistic the San Francisco PUC will find a way to build the watershed center planned by staff and an architect with feedback from Sunol residents.

Plans call for a 10,000-foot-square building with an aquarium mimicking an Alameda Creek streambed, displays on natural and cultural history, inactive exhibits, and a science lab with space for two classes of schoolchildren. A path through a 2.5-acre Discovery Trail also is envisioned.

In a related but separate project at the site, San Francisco PUC plans soon to start building a native plant nursery to grow disease-free plants for use in environmental projects on PUC lands.

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“There is still a plan to do something here,” said Tim Ramirez, manager of the PUC’s natural resources and lands division. “At the moment, the building is in a bit of a hiatus. But at some point we’re going to break free and build it as designed or modify the design in a way that reduces costs.”

Ramirez said while the water department’s main mission is to deliver water to 2.6 million Bay Area customers, the watershed center would meet a secondary goal to educate the public about the agency and the need to protect against pollution draining into reservoirs such as Calaveras and San Antonio.

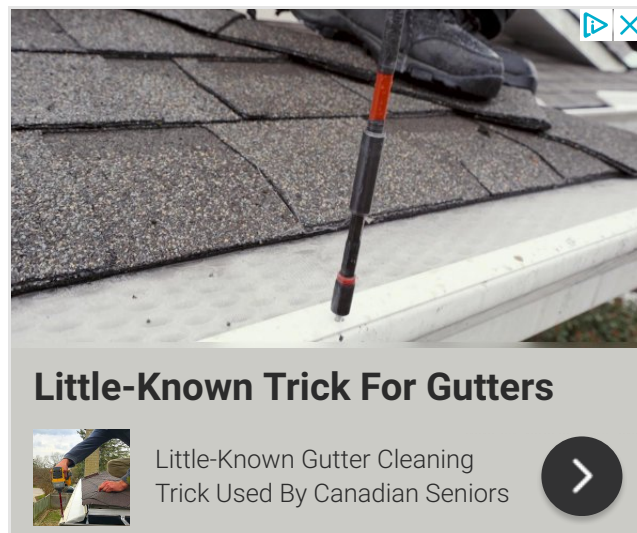
San Francisco PUC managers had hoped a single contractor for \$38 million could build both the watershed center and a nearby Sunol corporation yard used by water department workers.



But after the bids to do both jobs in a single contract were much higher than expected, PUC rebid the corporation yard as a single contract and awarded a \$31.8 million job in November. Work has started on the yard.

But that left the water department uncertain whether and when it can afford to build the watershed center.

Meanwhile, the water department has closed the weekday public access to the Sunol Water Temple until the corporation yard is finished in November 2018. To offset the public inconvenience, however, Ramirez said his agency is considering opening the temple on Saturdays and Sundays.



The water temple, modeled after the Temple of Vesta in Tivoli, Italy, has 12 Corinthian columns under a ceiling with paintings of maidens. The temple was built in 1910 by the Spring Valley Water Co, a private business that collected water from the East Bay and piped it to San Francisco residents before city's Hetch Hetchy water system was established.

The temple is a mixing point for water from Alameda Creek, Arroyo de la Laguna, and Pleasanton groundwater.

“We recognize the water temple is the first thing people look at when they come here,” Ramirez said. “The plans for the watershed center take that in account, so when you walk on the trails and take a turn, you will see the temple.”



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