

Pasadena Seeking Ideas on How to Restore Devil's Gate

■ **Recreation:** What appears on maps as a large blue lake is now a nearly dry basin choked with debris. Many people hope it will again become a regional public park.

By MARTHA L. WILLMAN
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Pasadena officials began consultations last week with La Canada Flintridge residents on what to do with the 250-acre wasteland of litter and debris that has filled the 71-year-old Devil's Gate Dam to the brim.

Hundreds of riders, hikers, joggers and bicyclists are being asked by a team of private consultants to express their wishes for restoration of the wasteland at the craggy base of the San Gabriel Mountains.



IRFAN KHAN / For The Times

Dumped debris fills the 250-acre reservoir. Officials want recreation ideas from groups such as equestrians and mountain bikers.

More than 50 La Canada residents attended a community meeting on the issue March 27 at La Canada High School. Meetings also have been held in Pasadena and Altadena and consultants have met with La Canada business and city leaders. More sessions are planned in the weeks ahead.

In the end, Pasadena officials and conservationists are hoping that the city of La Canada Flintridge, as well as businesses and local recreational groups, will contribute not only ideas but funds toward development of a regional recreation area.

Meantime, consultants are trying to determine what should lie ahead for the reservoir.

"The consensus of opinion that we are hearing is that people really want it left as natural as possible," said Lynne Velling, a public relations specialist and part of the consultant team that expects by this summer to answer some of the questions.

But by "natural," residents don't mean "as is."

What appears on maps as a large blue lake is now nothing more than a giant debris basin resembling a landfill. It is littered with broken bottles and other junk dumped illegally and is being dredged by gravel miners, although with no current purpose toward restoration.

Heidi Misrahy of Glendale, an instructor at the Flintridge Riding Club on the border of the Devil's Gate recreation area just east of La Canada's boundary with Pasadena, remembers what the now desolate basin used to be like when she began frequenting it 25 years ago. "It was a lake with nice trails around it, very scenic," she said. "Now it is very rocky, with a lot of noisy equipment working. I don't go there very often anymore, but I would like to."

So would a lot of other recreational users, all of whom have diverse demands for development of the reservoir area.

"We're just beginning to identify where community interests may be at variance—for instance, between equestrians and mountain bikers," said Crystal Balvin, another community relations specialist from the Pasadena firm of Hintz & Balvin, which is working on the project. "We are trying to find ways to accommodate their mutual interests, to act as facilitators so that they begin to discuss 'give and take.'"

Balvin added, "Devil's Gate is unique. This is not planners on high telling people what they are going to get. They really can have input."

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Devil's Gate Reservoir, a county flood control facility in the northwestern finger of Pasadena between La Canada and Altadena just north of the Foothill Freeway, was once distinguished by its easy paths through oak groves to a lake fed by natural streams. Native marsh plants, birds and wildlife inspired artists and authors who lived in the Arroyo Seco below.

But in the past decade or so, riding and hiking trails have been damaged or destroyed by floods and neglect. The lake has dried up.

The dam gates have been open since 1974, after state inspectors determined that the aged bulwark could collapse in an earthquake. "Since then, it's been essentially a check basin," said Don McIntyre, a consultant for the Santa Monica Mountains Conservancy, which has contributed money and joined the restoration project team. "Water pours on down to the ocean." The dam was built in 1920, not only to control flood water but to hold water in the reservoir so that it could seep back underground to the natural aquifer to replenish local supplies.

But the aquifer is polluted with toxic wastes dumped until the 1960s, reportedly from the nearby Jet Propulsion Laboratory, according to Pasadena officials. And the cost of repairing the dam and

developing the wildlife area has been estimated as high as \$90 million—considered too costly in view of the once abundant supply of relatively cheap imported water.

Initial recreational proposals were often grandiose and sometimes harebrained, such as the suggestion that the steep 80-foot spillway of the dam be converted into a giant "slip-and-slide" water chute to the riverbed below. The idea of creating a lake large enough for sailing and fed by water supplied by the Metropolitan Water District also has been shelved.

Now, officials say the rising cost and dwindling supply of imported water—coupled with more conservative plans for restoring the reservoir—shine a better light on the attempt to recapture a recreational resource. Studies under way include proposals to clean up toxic substances in the aquifer.

Pasadena city officials last year pledged to invest up to \$1 million for engineering, recreational and economic studies. Officials said preliminary results of the studies will be presented to the Pasadena Board of Directors within a few weeks.

Los Angeles County has set aside funds to repair the dam, now expected to cost up to \$10 million, and plans to improve the open space have been pared to a projected cost of \$5 million to \$10 million, McIntyre said.

The conservancy, a private organization that acquires and preserves urban wilderness areas, allocated \$175,000 last fall for the design of open space around the reservoir. Another \$1 million has been pledged to begin work as early as 1992.

Consultants are still drawing up plans on how the rest of the funding can be raised for the project but say a consortium of private and government interests, such as neighboring La Canada Flintridge, could be formed to help pay for improvements. JPL, which uses Pasadena land for employee parking, for instance, could charge workers for parking. The fees could be used for lighting and development of soccer fields, which are in demand.

Restoration of Devil's Gate, said McIntyre, is "dependent on finding sources of funds. We don't believe the county or city or conservancy have the kinds of funds needed to make that happen."

But he said he expects that project workers will find the means within a few months. "The idea of having a recreation area up there has been around for a very long time. Now, the time has come for it to become a reality, somehow."

Residents seeking to add input may contact the project office at (818) 405-4707 or community relations specialists at (818) 792-6463.