

Missing link for river trail

City, polo club in dispute over use of public property

By [Helen Gao](#), Union-Tribune Staff Writer

2:00 a.m. June 10, 2009



A handler with the San Diego Polo Club at Rancho Santa Fe guided horses on a trail used as a pony exercise track even though the club is required to maintain the trail for public use. (Laura Embry / Union-Tribune) -



A polo club is using a crucial link in a 55-mile coast-to-crest trail as a pony exercise track, disrupting plans that envision a path for hikers, bikers and equestrians.

For 20 years, advocates for the San Dieguito River Park have been working to build the multi-use trail that stretches from the surf near the Del Mar Fairgrounds to Volcan Mountain north of Julian. About 35 miles have been completed, but a segment is in limbo, held up in a dispute with the San Diego Polo Club at Rancho Santa Fe.

The club occupies 80 acres of public land leased from San Diego, located south of Via de la Valle, east of El

Camino Real and north of the San Dieguito River. It has taken over a 1.2-mile stretch of the trail near the river and continually grades it for use as a pony exercise track without obtaining the required permit.

“They made a conscious decision to do so, to keep pushing the limits and push the public out of the use of the trail, which is outrageous,” said county Supervisor Pam Slater-Price, chair of an intergovernmental agency that guides the river project.

Despite years of complaints, the club has yet to restore the trail segment to its original state so the public can use it without having to contend with trotting ponies.

City officials have known about the problem since 2003, and critics say they've failed to hold the club accountable.

“Everybody thinks it's dragged on too long, and everybody wants to get it resolved,” said Robert Vacchi, who oversees the city's code enforcement division.

Vacchi blamed the club for failing to follow through on city orders.

The club, which paid the city \$166,000 in rent last year, faults the city for its unwillingness to go along with proposed remedies.

The city fined the club \$25,000 in 2005 and ordered it to submit an application to restore the trail. The club began the process but didn't follow through.

The club could be fined up to \$250,000 for failing to address the trail violations, but the city hasn't done so. Instead, the Real Estate Assets Department sent the club a letter in September threatening to terminate its lease if it doesn't rectify the environmental damage it has caused.

“To me, kicking them off the property is a bigger hammer,” Vacchi said.

Representatives of the city, the club and the river park will meet tomorrow in the latest effort to resolve the issue.

The city has owned the land since 1983, when a builder donated it as part of a development agreement.

The club's lease began in 1986 and expires in 2012. It prohibits the club from altering the property without city permission and requires the club to maintain the trail for public use.

Without the city's authorization, the club has graded the trail, using a discing tractor to churn the top layer of the soil to create a soft surface for ponies to exercise.

Repeated discing over the years has widened the trail and pushed it closer to the river's edge, causing erosion and runoff problems, say city and river park officials.

“That destroyed the packed trail that could be used by bicyclists and hikers,” said Dick Bobertz, executive director of the San Dieguito River Park, who uses words like “commandeering” and “confiscating” to describe the club's actions.

The club has erected a fence around the trail with entrance and exit gates. A small sign on the fence reads: “This public trail is being maintained for the safety of the horses and the riders.” On a recent morning, groups of ponies, six at a time, were trotting on the trail, guided by handlers.

The club has five polo fields, a training school, a clubhouse and an outdoor lighted arena. Matches are held

Sundays from May through October. The San Diego Surf Soccer Club also uses the fields for practice and tournaments.

Chris Collins developed the club and holds the lease along with his father, Harry Collins.

The Collins family is prominent in real estate and development circles in San Diego. They own the historic La Valencia Hotel in La Jolla and Rancho Valencia Resort in Rancho Santa Fe. The family's business empire also includes La Jolla Development, Collins Development and Southwind Custom Builders.

Chris Collins said it has never been the club's intent to exclude the public from using the trail.

He said local horse riders use the trail regularly and noted that the dirt road next to the trail is open for public use for walking and jogging.

“The trail has been a public trail, always,” he said. “The reason why the fence was up there was to keep the public trail on one side and the polo activity on the other side, so people don't get killed.”

Collins acknowledged that the club violated city regulations by grading the trail without a permit, adding that the club didn't know it needed one.

“To keep a surface for horses to ride on properly, you need to do something,” he said. “That dirt out there compacts so hard you will break horses' legs.”

Recently, Collins submitted a proposal to set aside a 10-foot-wide public-use trail near the river's edge for bicyclists and hikers. Parallel to that would be a 24-foot-wide equestrian trail to be used by the public and the club as an exercise track. The two trails would be separated by a fence.

Bobertz said the river park group wants a 12-foot-wide trail dedicated solely for public use. He objects to Collins' proposal of having members of the horse-riding public share the equestrian trail with ponies, which he thinks is unsafe.

Another issue is who would pay for the reconstruction of the public trail. The club doesn't believe it should be required to build it out with decomposed granite the way the river park agency wants it done. River park officials are adamant that the club pay for it.

The river park agency is governed by representatives from San Diego, Del Mar, Solana Beach, Escondido and Poway, as well as county officials. It uses city and grant money to preserve habitats along the river valley and to create a trail system for the public.

Helen Gao: (619) 718-5181; helen.gao@uniontrib.com