

Outcry stalls park transfer to Yurok Tribe

March 13, 2020



A Del Norte County plan to transfer one of its disused parks to the Yurok Tribe was met Tuesday with the ire of the residents within the park's nearby subdivision.

Paul Crandall, general manager and treasurer of the Hunter Valley Community Service District, was accompanied by the board of directors of the water district as well as residents and landowners. He spoke to the Board of Supervisors representing unified opposition to the donation of Hunter Creek Park and their dissatisfaction with being left out of the decision-making process.

"Why was the land transfer never discussed with residents and landowners of Hunter Creek," he asked the board. "Why were they never given the opportunity to voice their opinion?"

Crandall added they were angered to have learned of the Board of Supervisors' discussion of transferring Hunter Creek Park, located at 22 Duncan Rd., via social media. He pointed to Yurok Tribal documents the land transfer would be for recreational and community events.

“This is viewed as greatly impacting the peace and quiet for our residents who cherish such an environment in Hunter Creek,” Crandall said.

District 5 Supervisor Bob Berkowitz encouraged residents to attend the Tuesday meeting via a March 6 post on Facebook. When he learned of the number of unheard voices on the issue, he asked it be tabled until the next Supervisor’s meeting and more input could be taken at a public meeting in Klamath in the interim.

Crandall wanted to know why a decision seemed to be on a fast track four days after the Hunter Creek community learned of it last Friday.

Yurok Tribal Councilman Ryan Ray told the supervisors he first requested the land transfer at its Feb. 25 meeting and wanted to be on the March 10 agenda to get the process started installing a playground.

“I apologize for the fast pace it’s been kind of going,” Ray told the supervisors and the Hunter Creek residents. “We have a playground, sitting in our fish plant. We’re going to install somewhere down there by April 8. It will always be open to the public. It ain’t about the land transfer. It’s about getting a playground into that piece of land. If it’s these guys that does it, if it’s the tribe that does it, if it’s the county that does it, it doesn’t matter as long as it gets done.”

The staff report said the county does not have the funds to maintain the park.

Yurok Tribal Chairman Joseph James asked the county to transfer the park to the tribe via its nonprofit entity, Kee Cha-E-Nar in a Feb. 19 letter to County Administrative Officer Jay Sarina. James also sought permission to install the playground equipment if the transfer wasn’t completed.

He pointed out the park is within the exterior boundaries of the Yurok Reservation and is a recreational space for Yurok families.

“While the tribe is grateful for this community recreational space, we are eager to play a more active role in the management, maintenance and use of Hunter Creek Park,” James wrote.

Board Chair Gerry Hemmingsen said he hadn’t received a plan from the Hunter Valley Community Service District. In the wake of the county not being in a position for quite a while not being able to service the park, Hemmingsen said he thought Ray’s plan was a win-win. So, he wanted to know what Crandall’s objection was.

“Had we not seen this on Facebook it would have gone forward and residents and property owners would never know it until it was lowered on us,” Crandall said. “My objection is we have a right to know what’s going on in our neighborhood. We have a right to know why someone who has no jurisdiction is being considered to take over property within our jurisdiction.”

Longtime Hunter Creek resident Sally Rodgers polled her neighbors on the issue and echoed Crandall’s sentiments.

“We have 64 properties within the subdivision and 89% of them said no, we do not want to see the tribe given this piece of property to manage and to run. We would like it to be left with our community people. Our service district is a nonprofit. The tribe is also,” Rodgers said.

Ray said the Yurok Tribe has only good intentions, pointing to the playgrounds it installed last year at Klamath Glen and a full-size basketball court in Klamath Townsite.

“This has been a concern, a hot topic, for a while, the park in Hunter Creek. I’ve came here before regarding this park about five years ago. That’s why I brought it forward,” Ray said.

He added the playground equipment donor stipulated that it be installed on tribal land.

“The original location they planned to locate the playground equipment was all rock and they couldn’t drill about 100 3-foot holes,” Ray said, pointing to why the Hunter Creek location was more ideal.

Berkowitz then floated the idea of a 25-year lease of the land to the Yurok Tribe. Ray said he would have to check with Tribal legal counsel on that option.

In the end, the land transfer was tabled and Berkowitz allowed to set up a meeting between the constituents in Klamath later this month.