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Former reservoir coveted for park

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A former reservoir owned by the Department of Water and Power on three acres of prime real estate is at the center of a battle over development and open space in Woodland Hills.

Environmentalists and neighbors have long eyed the Girard Reservoir, drained in the 1980s and now covered in trees and brush, for a park and walking trail.

Now, with 37 condos proposed next door, activists have a new sense of urgency for the site, located west of Topanga Canyon Boulevard and north of Mulholland Drive. They have begun urging Mayor Antonio Villaraigosa and Councilman Dennis Zine to push the DWP into selling the land to the Santa Monica Mountains Conservancy.

If the reservoir is designated public open space, the condo developer might have to include a wide buffer between the homes and the former reservoir, potentially limiting the size of the project, said Dave Breliant, president of Save Oak Savanna, a nonprofit group organized to fight the proposed development.

"If it was the conservancy's property, that reservoir could be a walking trail - and that's a big benefit for the community," Breliant said. "But our immediate concern is the restrictions open space would require on the adjacent development."

Earlier this month, Zine introduced a City Council motion asking the DWP to negotiate a sale or lease with the conservancy in order to convert the reservoir into a park.

"We need the DWP to make a decision," Zine said. "If they were using it, I would have no problem, but it's been sitting dormant there for years."

But DWP officials are reluctant to sell Girard Reservoir just yet.

Last year residential development in the southwest corner of the Valley finally outpaced the city's water system. Because of low water pressure, two dozen homes couldn't get water during peak morning demand hours on some of the hottest days.

The utility might need to build a water tank to serve nearby hillside homes, said Martin Adams, DWP director of water quality and operations.

"I'm reluctant to get rid of a piece of property in case I might need it," he said.

To fix the low water pressure and provide a backup source of water for the estimated 95,000 residents in the southwest Valley, the DWP has begun installing new water pipelines and a pressure-regulating station.

If those solve the low-pressure problem and hillside homes have water through the summer, the DWP will again consider selling Girard.

But if the problem persists, the DWP will need at least one of the three acres for a water tank, though the rest of the property could eventually be sold.

Under the law, Adams said, the utility must offer surplus land to city departments first and the Santa Monica Mountains Conservancy second, so there's little chance the utility will sell to a developer.

"Practically speaking, there's no way we would be able to sell that property to a developer," he said. "It wouldn't happen. With the goals of the city now, it's probably going to be some kind of open space."

That's good news to the conservancy, which has fended off developers and battled the DWP for the Girard property ever since the utility first declared the land surplus in 1999.

Save Oak Savanna members are eager for the DWP and conservancy to make a deal before the DS Ventures development goes through the city

approval process.

Paul Edelman, deputy director for natural resources and planning for the conservancy, said the DWP had considered selling the land on the open market several years ago, and the conservancy threatened to take the utility to court.

"It's one of the places we have money ready to go if they're willing to sell it to us," said Edelman, who estimates the price could range from \$300,000 to \$1 million.

"We're willing to work with the DWP to find a way to make it comfortable for them to sell it to us for parkland," he said.

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