

Here's the \$10M change coming to SF's Golden Gate Park

By Madilynne Medina, *News Reporter*

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A creek flows into the restored Middle Lake in Golden Gate Park in San Francisco on June 20, 2024. Douglas Zimmerman/SFGATE

People are creeping into a closed-off section of Golden Gate Park as a construction project to renovate the once-dilapidated area around Middle Lake nears completion.

When SFGATE visited the 14-acre site on Monday, there were several people in the fenced off area, including a woman with a child and a dog, a man running

through the trail and two people walking up one of the hills. Sarah Keating-Wolk, who's lived near the park for about seven years, was also there.

"I was like, 'Should I do it?' The gate over there was more open than it normally is," Keating-Wolk told SFGATE. "I think people have had the same idea like, 'What the heck?' I just want to see it."



A fenced-off area of Golden Gate Park.
Madilynne Medina/ SFGATE

It was a similar story when SFGATE first visited the project site in June and spotted several walkers inside the fenced area. At the time, Alex Schuknecht, the project manager, told SFGATE it happens often, but the trespassing likely won't be an issue for long.

The lake could open as soon as this Friday, if "everything goes as planned" while project leaders await final approvals from the San Francisco Planning Department, Daniel Montes, a spokesperson for the San Francisco Recreation and

Park Department, told SFGATE. The fencing is set to come down sometime this week, but he advised parkgoers to stay out of closed-off areas.

“Middle Lake has always been a popular and beloved destination in Golden Gate Park,” Montes said. “We understand that people are eager to enjoy this beautiful landmark.”



Despite the area being fenced off, a person walks their dog through the restored section near Middle Lake in Golden Gate Park in San Francisco on June 20, 2024.

Douglas Zimmerman/SFGATE

Though the new vegetation and the now-sparkling lake, complete with a family of geese, colorful poppy flowers and a flowing cascade, are visible outside the gate, the project isn't fully complete.

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Montes said crews are working on some accessibility accommodations and gardeners are ensuring that the plants are “healthy and well established.”

“It's extremely difficult to enclose the entire area of the lake, as it's surrounded by dense brush and trails,” Montes added.



Ducks float through the restored Middle Lake in Golden Gate Park in San Francisco on June 20, 2024.
Douglas Zimmerman/SFGATE

Project leaders began planning the [\\$10 million restoration](#) in summer 2018, and construction started in winter of 2022. The lake was originally slated to reopen in early 2024, according to the signs outside the construction, but Schuknecht said it was delayed by several roadblocks, including a 25-foot-long sinkhole.

Middle Lake is part of the Chain of Lakes at the western end of Golden Gate Park and was originally dug up more than a decade ago, in 1898. Before that, the area was full of sand dunes.

But over the next century, Schuknecht said, the lake area became run down, with dirt holes, broken benches and other major maintenance issues. Complaints about the lake's "slow deterioration" have trickled in since the 1980s.



The restored Middle Lake in Golden Gate Park in San Francisco on June 20, 2024.
Douglas Zimmerman/SFGATE

Several years before the project construction started, the lake was so dried up that people might've not even realized it was a lake, Tamara Aparton, a spokesperson for SF Rec and Park, told SFGATE. She also described it as being full of invasive plants and animals.

Following the project, the grass perimeter around the 7-foot-deep lake is expected to make a "great habitat" for many species, Schuknecht said. Park officials expect about 350 species to fill the site, including native wildlife and some birds already moving in, he added. The project is also adding 10,000 native plants to the area.

During the construction, crews also removed many trees that were in "bad shape," most of them being about 77 eucalyptus trees, replacing them with 150 native species of trees. The eucalyptus trees still have a presence at the site though, as the tree trunks are being used as benches that are placed throughout the pathways that lace the hills surrounding the lake.



California poppies on the hillside next to the restored Middle Lake in Golden Gate Park in San Francisco on June 20, 2024.

Douglas Zimmerman/SFGATE

Walking along the path, visitors will see the 800-foot flowing cascade.

Schuknecht said the team worked on it for months, and he described it as a “big milestone” when it finally had running water. As visitors walk up the pathway past the cascade, he promised that they will be able to hear the birds chirping.

“Up here, while you’re near the running water, you can’t hear the cars anymore,” Schuknecht said. “So it’s like you’re far removed.”



A waterfall leads down a hill to the restored Middle Lake in Golden Gate Park in San Francisco on June 20, 2024.

Douglas Zimmerman/SFGATE

The pathway eventually leads to the fly casting pools next to the park's Polo Field. And on the lake's opposite side, there's also an area that Schuknecht referred to as the "Wedding Meadow."

The space, which has a view of the lake, is a grass area surrounded by benches that Schuknecht said will be available for weddings or other events. Some people still wanted to use it as a wedding venue even before the construction, when there were many dirt holes in the area and one bench that had fallen apart.



A bench made of reclaimed wood on the walkway near Middle Lake in Golden Gate Park in San Francisco on June 20, 2024.

Douglas Zimmerman/SFGATE

Pre-construction, Schuknecht said, the dried-up lake area was sometimes frequented by the public for other uses, such as children building forts.

“There were a few people walking by and they were disappointed that it wasn’t going to be the sort of dry wasteland where they could do whatever they want,” he said. “We’ll still have plenty of space to have fun. This is a big open woods now.”

The lake rehabilitation was made possible by [several city funds and park bonds](#), with the first one being a park bond approved by voters in 2012. Schuknecht said project leaders weren’t met with much opposition, and community feedback was mostly positive, except for initial concerns about traffic congestion as crews moved in.

“Especially right at the beginning, they were moving really fast,” he said. “Lots of trucks in and out of here. All the dirt was hauled off right away, right from there.”



A creek flows into the restored Middle Lake in Golden Gate Park in San Francisco on June 20, 2024.
Douglas Zimmerman/SFGATE

Keating-Wolk said before construction started, she was accustomed to her daily walks through the dried-up site, which felt like a brief “escape.” But after seeing the rehabilitation, she said it feels more inviting than it was before, and she expects to see more people in the area now.

“I have been impatiently waiting for it to reopen since it closed,” Keating-Wolk said.