

OPEN MEADOW



Six-acre meadow with the reservoir in the distance.

SAM LUBELL

The decade-long quarrel over whether Silver Lake Reservoir's grassy six-acre meadow should be opened for public use has spawned a less-than-idyllic dialogue among local residents. With the meadow now on target to open in the spring of 2009, it appears those in favor of the project have won the land battle. But since the reservoir itself is scheduled to be decommissioned in 2015, issues both large and small regarding the future of this beloved oasis remain undecided.

The 795-million-gallon reservoir sits in an upscale, architecturally-rich neighborhood that features residences designed by Richard Neutra, John Lautner and Frank Lloyd Wright, among others. In 1997, Mia Lehrer & Associates was commissioned by the Department of Water and Power to develop the Silver Lake Master Plan for the reservoir and its adjacent land. Unveiled in 2000, the plan included a jogging path around the reservoir and possible designation of the meadow as a park.

While debate over the meadow predates the tenure of Councilman Eric Garcetti (District 13), his support for opening the space has angered many opponents of the project. One such group, Silver Lake Friends and Neighbors (SLFANS), cited increased traffic, lack of pedestrian safety, and loss of wildlife habitat as compelling reasons to keep the gates locked. Those concerns drew accusations of NIMBYism from open meadow proponents. More dramatically, SLFANS warnings of increased crime and graffiti ignited claims of codified racism on blogs and message boards.

On January 14, 2008, Garcetti officially announced his plan to open the meadow to the public. Under the plan, a portion of the six-acre meadow will be landscaped and is to be designated for "passive recreation." Activities such as soccer games and barbecuing will be prohibited. Additionally, the meadow will remain fenced off and will be closed at dusk. Councilman Tom LaBonge (District 4), whose jurisdiction includes the bluff that abuts the meadow to the north, said that area would be off-limits and left "for wildlife only."

Shelley Marks, President of the Committee to Save Silver Lake's Reservoirs (CSSLR) sees the plan as an effective compromise.

"It addresses the concerns of people who have questions about security, access and habitat," she said in a press release through Garcetti's office. Screenwriter and Silver Lake resident Ben Queen agrees, "They're not building The Grove. It won't become overwhelming. I think it'll be manageable and people will be pleasantly surprised," he said.

An issue not yet decided is whether to install a traffic signal at the intersection of Silver Lake Boulevard and Earl Street to provide a safe pedestrian crossing to the meadow's southern entrance. The idea has some residents apprehensive over increased cut-through traffic. Garcetti's spokesperson, Julie Wong said, "we are going back to the DOT [Department of Transportation] and see if there are any alternatives that might address those concerns."

With most other operational issues already decided, and District Director of Community Development Heather Repenning working with the community's Meadow Advisory Board to finalize design and landscaping issues, the debate will likely shift to the future of the reservoir itself.

The 45-foot-deep reservoir was drained in January 2008 after bromate, a naturally occurring carcinogen, was detected. Now refilled, Silver Lake Reservoir (along with nearby Ivanhoe Reservoir) will be taken offline in 2015 and replaced by underground storage tanks at the Headworks Spreading Grounds in Griffith Park. While the decision to decommission the reservoir is not directly related to the bromate contamination, it does comply with a federal law designed to secure public water supply.

Proposals for the reservoir's future have ranged from filling it in and creating expanded parkland, to reducing the size of the man-made lake and naturalizing its shoreline. The latter option would retain local homeowner's cherished water views while providing continued access to an emergency water supply for firefighters.

If there were any tea leaves to be found at the bottom of the recently drained basin regarding the reservoir's ultimate fate, they may have been read by Councilman Garcetti who said through his spokesperson that he intends Silver Lake Reservoir to remain a "body of water." **MIKE SCHULTE**