

City of Foster City - Difficult Decision



Council Corner

April 23, 2008

by [Mayor Pam Frisella](#)

Difficult Decision

First let me state that my primary responsibility as your Mayor is to keep you safe. Your City Council has made a decision that may not seem fair to some but it was the right decision.

Our City is kept dry by the excellent condition of our levees. It was brought to our attention several months ago that the ground squirrel burrows along our levee, which range anywhere from five to 30 feet in length and between two to four feet below the soil surface, could compromise the integrity of our levee infrastructure.

These are not just holes but tunnels sometimes from one side of the levee to the other as in the case at Sea Cloud Park. The City of Fernley, Nevada, flooded this winter because of burrowing on their levees and when that report was confirmed it validated the City's decision.

If you are asking, why can't we just fill those holes with something?? The answer is that this does not solve the root of the problem. A steady ground squirrel population would only continue to damage the levee infrastructure by building new burrow systems.

These are ground squirrels, not the grey tree squirrels in your backyard. Personally I have two tree squirrels in my backyard that don't pose the same risks to our community as does the ground squirrel. Additionally, the ground squirrels we are seeing on our levee can carry bubonic plague which can be transmitted to humans by the fleas carried by the squirrels.

As their population increases, the squirrels become more susceptible to disease. I have been contacted by the County's vector ecologist who fully supports the City's efforts and has offered to examine the carcasses for potential diseases.

Here lies the issue. How do you humanely solve this problem? Our staff has researched many options and if you would like all the details, please contact me.

The Council decided on an effective yet economical approach that would pose the least harm to non-target animals, the environment, and the community while complying with the State's laws and regulations. The bait station method, where boxes containing bait are strategically placed along the levee embankment has been selected. The entrance holes are approximately 3-inches in diameter allowing access by ground squirrels but not by larger animals. The squirrels need to feed a few times before the bait takes effect.

If you are asking, what if my dog eats it? There is a leash law in Foster City. I cannot imagine you leading your dog to one of these green boxes to investigate, finding a way to open the box, and then allowing your pet to eat the bait. Similarly, cats would find it difficult to fit through the small openings.

Are there some flaws? I would say yes, but we have committed to one year and then we will evaluate the program.

Both Scott Delucchi and Ken White (from the Humane Society) acknowledged that we had to do what we had to do to keep our residents safe. They suggested a birth control method

which would include catching the squirrels, giving them a shot of birth control vaccine (at \$2 -\$10 per injection), releasing them back to the levee (since it is illegal to catch and release them elsewhere).

We have contacted many other cities to see if they have used this method and have found only two cities that considered birth control to control their squirrel populations. Of these, only one city reported success, the other cancelled the program before it started. However we will reexamine our options in one year. Bottom line is they would still be back to burrowing after that shot!!!

The best solution would be to modify their habitat to make it less appealing for the squirrel population. However it is cost prohibitive in vast areas such as our levees.

I, personally, have been attacked for deciding to kill the squirrels. Most of these emails were sent by non-Foster City residents. They don't have a vested interest in the integrity of our levees. It is the residents of this City that I have to answer to.

We had two public meetings, one on November 5th, 2007 and one on February 4th, 2008 during which the City considered various options of population control. These meetings were publicly noticed and the public was invited to attend.

Squirrels are classified as non-game mammals, meaning that if these rodents are interfering with property, they may be controlled in any legal manner by the owner (unfortunately, us).

Again it is a complicated subject but in the end it is a safety issue of our property and our residents. If you have any comments please don't hesitate to call me or email me at pfrisella@fostercity.org.