Hauling out mud and toppled trees, estimated $4 million in Stern Grove flood repairs starts this week

Sam Whiting
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When 700,000 gallons of water from a broken pipe valve flooded into Stern Grove, the onrush pushed the dirt from beneath 50 or so eucalyptus trees, seriously weakening the hillside they had anchored. The next day, Stern Grove Festival’s executive director, Bob Fiedler, stepped into four feet of fresh mud and his mind shifted from the prospect of canceling the finale concert of the 2021 series to whether the 2022 season could happen.

The answer may come this week when a crane, an excavator and a chainsaw crew begin clearing away the undermined eucalyptus trees. At the same time, trucks will start hauling away the slurry, a mixture of water, dirt and sand, that swamped the backstage and grassy audience areas and even touched the floorboards of the stage itself.
“It’s a perfect storm,” Fiedler said during a tour last week as he looked at the silt that had dried as high as the table tops and fence tops in the picnic area. “We are 150 feet down from street level, a perfect setting for a tremendous amount of erosion damage.”

The repair is estimated to cost $4 million, to be funded by the San Francisco Public Utilities Commission and its ratepayers. It could be more, with final damage to be determined by a team of geotechnical engineers, biologists, archaeologists and arborists, all trying to figure out how to restore a hill that was carved into gullies by the rushing water.

“Who expects a flood in the middle of a drought?” Fiedler said. “Pretty Bizarro, but maybe par for the course in 2021.”

Situated down a steep drop from the northwest corner of 19th Avenue and Sloat Boulevard, Stern Grove is a 60-acre city park that was gifted to the city by the Goldman family, heirs to the Levi Strauss fortune. It is managed by the Recreation and Park Department, but the nonprofit Stern Grove Festival operates the 10-concert summer season. In 2005, the Goldmans put $15 million into an upgrade that included a new stage, backstage facilities and landscaping designed by the famed Lawrence Halprin.
The park and concert venue is always open, and anybody who happened to be enjoying the tranquility at 12:30 p.m. on Monday, Aug. 23, got a story to tell for years. The calamity came from a 54-inch diameter main line carrying fresh water to the city from the Crystal Springs Reservoir. An air valve was leaking and crews were repairing it.

“It just needed a few new bolts on the valve, and the valve breaks,” explained Steven Ritchie, assistant general manager for water with the PUC. “When these go, they go explosively.”

The explosion was at 22nd Avenue and Sloat, some 50 feet west of the main concert entrance. It first flooded the Francis M. McAteer Tennis Courts, which are surrounded by a Depression-era stone retaining wall. The wall served as a dam, causing the water to pool up and lose some energy before it flowed over the wall and down to spread out behind the backstage infrastructure.

“There was a moment,” Fiedler said, “when we didn’t know if buildings were going to have to come down.”

The wooden buildings stood their ground though water rose about two feet up the exterior walls and seeped inside. The carpets have been removed and the buildings sealed off to be de-humidified. The extent of interior damage is not yet known, but, at the very least, some drywall and flooring will have to be replaced.

The full extent of exterior damage also is unknown.

“One challenge is to take out the trees without destabilizing the hillside more and causing a bigger problem,” said Ritchie. “It will be a dance between tree removal and soil stabilization.” The grass also will have to be re-seeded.

Eastern Stern Grove has been surrounded by a Cyclone fence and will probably remain closed until the end of the year, at least. Also closed are the tennis courts and the Trocadero Clubhouse, a historic venue operated by Rec and Park within the Grove. Fifty-six permitted events, mostly weddings, have been canceled or relocated to other park facilities through the end of the year.
The waste of 700,000 gallons of drinking water is “a little deal,” Ritchie said, in comparison to the 265 million gallons served to customers daily. So is a $4 million repair. When a similar accident happened nearby in 2013, homes were flooded. The water department had to pay for the home repairs, resulting in a $15 million bill.

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The damage to concert equipment thus far has been negligible. Most of it is rented and crews were able to move aside enough mud to get it off the grounds and on its way to the BottleRock music festival in Napa Valley.

But festival finances suffered a hit. All Grove concerts are free, but table reservations and sponsorship help pay for the $3 million series. The last show of each season, called the Big Picnic, is its annual fund raiser. Tower of Power and Too $hort were to have headlined this year’s flood-canceled closer.

“It’s the most important concert of the year,” said Fiedler, estimating that at least $100,000 in expected revenue was lost. That money is not coming back unless it comes by way of a claim for damages with the city attorney.

Fiedler is determined that the 85th season will begin on schedule in June and he already has a lineup in mind.

“We’re trying to bring back Tower of Power,” he said.

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Sam Whiting has been a staff writer at The San Francisco Chronicle since 1988. He started as a feature writer in the People section, which was anchored by Herb Caen's column, and has written about people ever since. He is a general assignment reporter with a focus on writing feature-length obituaries. He lives in San Francisco and walks three miles a day on the steep city streets.
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