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Large turnout backs strict Laguna rules

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SEBASTOPOL — One hundred and sixty people jammed the planning commission meeting hall Tuesday, most of them to endorse a plan for strict protections for the Laguna de Santa Rosa.

While letters of protest from developers, landowners and Sebastopol city officials poured in before the hearing, only a few of the 20 speakers at the hearing criticized the Laguna Committee's recommendation for no development and no filling along the laguna and its waterways.

The laguna is a major tributary to the Russian River.

The overwhelming majority of speakers and a large segment of the crowd supported strict laws to protect wildlife habitat and preserve the laguna's flood control capabilities.

To dramatize the issue, one laguna protectionist brought a red-tailed hawk which perched on his arm in the lobby of the Veterans Memorial Building.

Some commissioners directed challenging questions to committee members during a study session before the hearing, but otherwise did not indicate their response to the committee report. They'll hold another discussion on the evening of March 30 before making a decision.

A final decision will be made by the City Council, perhaps at a April 25 meeting.

The 50-page report calls for many protection measures from reforestation to acquiring laguna waterfront for a park, but it was the fill issue that attracted the crowd Tuesday.

West Sebastopol resident Karen Eberhardt's said that allowing developers to fill the laguna is "like trading Yosemite for Disneyland." The analogy drew thunderous applause.

"You have so much to gain from taking the wider view, and so much

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to lose from giving in," said Eberhardt, a member of the Western Sonoma County Rural Alliance.

Others, though, are urging the board to water down the Laguna Committee's proposals.

Bob Harder, spokesman for the North Coast Builder's Exchange, said that not only private landowners, but some of the City of Sebastopol's redevelopment projects could be stymied if the Laguna report is accepted without modification.

He quoted statistics from Sebastopol's city engineer indicating that if all buildable land below the 76-foot elevation flood level were to be developed, it would reduce the laguna's flood control capacity of 800,000 acre feet of water by only 300 acre feet.

"You should not compromise development for that fraction (of flood water storage)," Harder said.

Several Russian River residents told the commission that every fraction counts during a flood. "You must realize the importance of one inch of flood level with the flood is one-half inch from your door," said Brenda Adelman of the River Citizens Sewer Committee.

Adelman, along with Sierra Club representative Carol Veilutini,

spoke in favor of the no-fill recommendation. But they registered their disagreement with a clause in the report that endorses an increase of treated wastewater into the waterway.

That is an issue generating debate among environmentalists who believe that wastewater could enhance the habitat versus those who adamantly oppose an increase in the belief it will pollute drinking water supplies. That debate, however, has moved into the Santa Rosa City Council Chambers and only briefly surfaced in Sebastopol Tuesday.

Several members of the Laguna Advisory Committee told the commission Tuesday their report reflects a vision of optimum protection of the waterway, and indicated they expect fine-tuning by the city. But a spokesman said the committee is adamant about not allowing development in natural areas or losing water storage to more fill. The "no net fill" requirement means that a developer adding any fill to the waterway must remove fill elsewhere.

A commissioner who questioned the qualifications of the committee members, echoing concerns expressed in letters of protest about the report, were told by the committee chairman that five professionals, including foresters, a botanist and a biologist, served on the volunteer panel.