

Planners pave way for Palm Terrace

Laguna panel's pleas in vain

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SEBASTOPOL — With pleas to save the Laguna de Santa Rosa still fresh in their minds, city planning commissioners nonetheless paved the way for new development in the flood plain.

Near midnight Tuesday, after most of the 160 people who attended a hearing on the laguna protection plan had left, the commission voted 6 to 1 to issue an environmental clearance for Cheli and Young's proposed 29-home Palm Terrace subdivision. The nine-acre project that borders laguna wetlands was

formerly known as Suffolk Meadows.

Two of the homes are to be built within the laguna's 100-year flood zone, which the city's Laguna Advisory Committee had hoped to spare from new development.

In dry months, the laguna is little more than a stream, but often in the winter it is a huge flood pool. The waterway, which also carries treated effluent from the regional sewage treatment plant, is a main Russian River tributary.

The committee had recommended no new construction on undeveloped land within the flood plain. Its report is being reviewed by the Planning Commission. The Sebastopol City Council will make a final decision on the report, possibly on April 25.

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Commissioner Sarah Gurney urged fellow planners to postpone action on Palm Terrace until a decision on the laguna report, but the other commissioners were eager to proceed with the project.

The site has been the object of several housing proposals in recent years.

"I'm real disappointed," said Laguna committee member Suzanne Nelson after the commission declared Palm Terrace environmentally safe. She said the project is a threat to nature.

"This means a reduction of wildlife habitat," she said.

The committee's report was the subject of a lengthy hearing just prior to the Palm Terrace review. The recommendations have prompted hints of legal challenges from the city and from builders and developers, all of whom own

land in the flood plain.

On the other end of the spectrum, many people made passionate speeches urging the city to do everything possible to protect the lagoon that they described as an "irreplaceable treasure" that ranks with the ocean and vineyards as a symbol of Sonoma County's beauty.

Members of the Laguna Committee have taken a hard line on saving the habitat that remains. The waterway, they say, has deteriorated for generations from erosion, development and grazing.

Nearly half of the laguna flood plain basin is within or near Sebastopol city limits and is developed with streets, homes and businesses. The committee wanted the remainder left in its natural state.

For development occurring in already urbanized portions of the flood plain, the committee suggested a requirement that for every cubic foot of fill brought in for a project, one cubic foot should be removed elsewhere from the Laguna in order to preserve the basin's flood storage capacity.