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THE PAPER

YUMA COUNTY PAPER VOL.9 NO.42, MAR. 24-30, 1988

Hearing crowd supports Laguna report

BY BRUCE ROBINSON

A ringing endorsement of the measures to preserve the Laguna de Santa Rosa was delivered to the Sebastopol Planning Commission Tuesday evening as the recommendations of the city's Laguna Advisory Committee were supported by virtually all of the 30 speakers who addressed a public hearing on the subject.

While a sharp-eyed red-tailed hawk, representing the wildlife that resides in the Laguna, greeted arrivals at the Sebastopol Veterans Building, a standing-room-only crowd of about 150 people inside listened to two hours of testimony, frequently applauding the more impassioned speakers.

"Filling the Laguna is like eating your arm to feed your face," raged Karen Eberhardt in a sweeping denunciation of environmental exploitation. "It's myopia versus reality; it's trading Yosemite for Disneyland."

Calling the Laguna "a rich and elegant waterway," Jude Kreissman described a recent walk near it in which she encountered a curious grey fox just a few hundred yards from the Sebastopol Community Center. "It's a thrill to know there's a grey fox right here in Sebastopol with the rest of us," she said.

Representatives of the Sierra Club, the Native Plant Society, the Rural Alliance, and other environmental organizations added their support to the measures suggested by the Laguna Advisory Committee, including the two most controversial proposals: a ban on all new construction on lands lying below the 100-year floodplain level, which is set at 76 feet above sea level; and a "no net fill" policy when there is construction within the Laguna, to preserve the waterway's flood storage capacity.

Bruce Aspinall, the city's planning consultant, defused most of the potential contro-

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versy at the outset of the hearing when he told the commissioners the committee members had explained that their intent was to have their recommendations apply to "the natural, undeveloped, environmental portions" of the Laguna, not the low-lying areas of Sebastopol that are at or below the 76-foot level, but have already been developed. Much of eastern downtown Sebastopol fits that description, including the Morris Street industrial area, and the proposed site for the city's new police station.

However, Aspinall explained that the "no net fill" recommendation "is meant to apply everywhere." No one contested that idea during the hearing. "It's a good concept," said Bob Harder of the North Coast Builder's Exchange, "This is the only thing that's logical for the urban area." Two other speakers urged that the fill policy be made more stringent through a requirement that any fill used in a project within the Laguna be excavated from some other site within the same flood basin.

Three business owners in eastern Sebastopol voiced concerns that they might be unfairly restricted in efforts to change or rebuild their facilities, particularly if the provision for no new development under 76 feet were to be broadly applied. But they joined in supporting the ideal of Laguna protection. Gravenstein Station owner Wes Vail warned that the cooperation of the county will have to be enlisted "or the report will just go on a shelf and sink slowly into the dust."

Joan Vilms, who described herself as "a private land conservation consultant," told the meeting she believed that such mechanisms as transfer of development rights and precise definitions of the areas in which the strict restrictions would be enforced could make everyone happy. "This is a win-win situation," Vilms said. "The key is cooperation and compensation."

Several other speakers, including newly declared congressional candidate Lionel Gambill of Occidental and Sebastopol Chamber of Commerce representative Bill Haigwood, urged that goals of partial restoration of the Laguna's riparian habitat be included in the city's final Laguna

policy.

The commission took no action when the lengthy hearing was concluded, but scheduled a special session for Wednesday evening, March 30, to tackle the chore of digesting the testimony and the Laguna Committee's report into a policy document that can be forwarded to the Sebastopol City Council for consideration at the hearing scheduled for April 25.

Later in Tuesday's meeting, the commissioners drew on the information they had received at the hearing and during two earlier hours of study on the Laguna report and approved an environmental clearance for the Palm Terrace subdivision. Since it was last reviewed by the panel Feb. 23, the project was scaled back from 38 to 29 lots, Aspinall reported, and it conformed to the "no net fill" policy proposed in the Laguna report. Although Sarah Gurney urged her colleagues to hold off on taking action until the commission received "a strong policy or guidelines from the council," hers was the lone dissenting vote as the group voted 6-1 to approve the preparation of a negative declaration for the project.