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Laguna preservation measures debated

BY BRUCE ROBINSON

Despite a common goal, the more than 100 people who took part in a four-hour hearing Monday night on proposed measures to preserve and defend the Laguna de Santa Rosa voiced a broad array of views on how that objective might best be accomplished.

There was unanimous agreement that the once-sprawling waterway is in acute need of protective measurements, although the reasons stemmed from two overlapping perspectives: environmentalists concerned about the degradation of the second largest freshwater marsh in northern California and its riparian habitat, and property owners and others who fear the loss of the Laguna's flood storage capacity as development and sedimentation continue to fill it in.

Sebastopol planning consultant Bruce Aspinall praised the Laguna Committee's report as "one of the best compendiums that exists on the Laguna," and noted that only three of the panels 48 recommendations have prompted serious debate. But those three, Aspinall said, represent "the guts of the issue."

These recommendations are that there be no new development on lands lying below the 100-year flood level of 76 feet above sea level, and that a "no net fill" policy be required for any construction

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anywhere within the laguna flood storage basin.

Committee member Bill Haigwood defused the potential argument on the building ban proposal with a map showing that it would be applied only to those lands classifiable as wetlands, which hold little development potential. The already urbanized properties lying within the flood plain would be subject to the no-net-fill policy, but "there's no reason they should not be filled as needed," Haigwood said. If possible, that fill "should be taken out of the Laguna flood plain somewhere," he added.

Helen Libeu, another member of the committee, cautioned that "Where you get the fill is more important than what you do with it. You can't just do it anywhere in the Laguna if you're concerned about habitat."

Steve Robertson, who lives on the floor of the Laguna basin, argued that infilling is vital in some cases. "Common sense tells me that if it gets wet out there, I need high ground to take my livestock to," he said, urging the council to allow a "moratorium" for landowners to take such measures before any new restrictions are enacted.

Other speakers called on the council to take a firm stance and prevent any further damage to the Laguna. "If you give in, I fear that life as we know it in Sebastopol will begin to be over," said Jude Kreisman.

But Sebastopol has jurisdiction over only a small portion of the 35 square miles

that comprise the Laguna, and numerous speakers complained that the actions of Santa Rosa and the county have far greater impact than anything the city council can do. "We're looking at Mickey Mouse kicking dirt on the front porch while King Kong is crapping in the back yard," observed John Taylor.

Still, the council was often urged to take action on the Laguna plan as an example to other local governments. Said Glen Ellen resident Steve Klozner, the president of the Friends of Sonoma Creek, "If a riparian area like the Laguna can't be saved, there is no riparian area in the county that can be saved."

"We have a duty to this report," agreed councilman Bill Roventini, as the discussion wound down. But Roventini said he had fears about the potential for "inverse condemnation" in the proposed no-net-fill requirement and joined with other council members in calling for a further study session to try to refine the recommendations of the Laguna committee and the city planning commission's review of the report into a cohesive municipal policy. Only Mayor Pro Tem Anne Magnie indicated a readiness to adopt the report as submitted.

As the meeting passed the four hour cut-off that had been earlier set, the council voted 4-0 to "accept" the two reports, but stopped short of "adopting" the recommendations of either document. Instead, they decided to hold a single-subject study session for a "line-by-line" review of the report on Monday night, May 23, at 7 p.m. in the Sebastopol Veterans Building.

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