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Opinion

Laguna primer:
City policy 1A

by Mike Jasper

Everybody's always taking about the Laguna, but nobody's ever doing anything about it. That was once true, at least until late 1986, when the Sebastopol City Council appointed the Laguna Advisory Committee.

Now the Laguna de Santa Rosa is the subject of one of the most controversial reports to ever confront the city of Sebastopol. Called the Laguna Advisory Study — or for simplicity's sake, the Laguna Report — it has become the number one issue within the city limits. Newspaper articles, radio spots and TV reports bandy about terms such as "no net fill" or "riparian" vegetation or "76-foot flood plain." And yet more than one reader has asked: What are they talking about? This column will try to reveal all. Please clip and save.

LAGUNA ADVISORY COMMITTEE: Commissioned by the Sebastopol City Council in November, 1986, the committee consisted of 16 interested citizens who undertook the ambitious task of looking at ways to protect the Laguna and make recommendations to that end to the City Council. The committee included one building contractor, three developers, one carpenter, one ready-mix plant owner, one with scientific degrees in three fields, two with degrees in relevant environmental fields, one registered professional forester and one member of state-appointed forestry committees.

RIPARIAN VEGETATION — All the foliage growing around the banks of the Laguna, such as trees, bushes, grasses and flowers. No mystery here.

VERNAL POOLS — Parts of the Laguna where the environment is rich in wildlife and/or vegetation.

100-YEAR FLOOD PLAIN — Somewhat a myth. Every hundred years, the Laguna area is supposed to suffer a terrible flood. Some say the 1986 flood was actually the 50-year flood. Go figure floods.

76-FOOT FLOODPLAIN: Also somewhat a myth, an arbitrary figure. But it's the figure the Laguna Report works with. The Army Corps of Engineers has considered dropping it to 75 feet. At one time, the Army Corps estimated it at 72 feet. Then the big flood hit in 1986, and the Corps decided to re-evaluate their estimates.

Simply put, any land below the 76-foot elevation is going to be flooded during the 100-year flood. Think of a large bowl. The edge of the bowl, in this analogy, is 75-feet high. When it floods, the bowl gets filled to the brim. Sometimes the water trickles over the brim. But then, it is an arbitrary figure.

NO NET FILL — Think of the Laguna and the land surrounding it as a large bowl. The bowl is full of water, right to the tip of the brim. Now throw in a ton of sand. Guess what happens? Displacement. Simple grade school physics. The water floods over the brim.

So in "no net fill" areas recommended by the Laguna Report (such as Morris St.), any fill put into one side of the Laguna "bowl" has to be taken out from some other area of the bowl, to keep the water-holding volume even.

But the Laguna is not a simple bowl. To take fill from another part of the Laguna takes extra effort, extra time and extra money. Some developers are protesting this extra inconvenience and economical hindrance to their developments. That's why the "no net fill" recommendation in the Laguna Report is highly controversial.

NO DEVELOPMENT BELOW 76-FEET ELEVATION — Even more controversial. Don't put anything into the bowl. The Laguna Report calls for no development below 76-foot elevation. This has been generally interpreted as no *new* development below 76 feet. The "no net fill" requirement, on the other hand, has been generally interpreted to mean the requirement for developments already in existence, such as on Morris St.

However, the language of the report is vague and open to interpretation. Several exist. This is mine.