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Laguna de Santa Rosa: An old issue revived

By Diane Peterson

A few weeks ago, a couple of our readers approached us asking if we would reprint Diane Peterson's Nov. 2, 1983 article on the Laguna de Santa Rosa.

Titled "Can an environmental goldmine be preserved?" we found the article to be as applicable today as it was then. The article also provides a good history of the Laguna de Santa Rosa. It has been edited for length.

It is the second most important riparian marshland in the state. It comprises one-third of the total groundwater basin in the county. It possesses a wide range of ecological environments, from Great Blue Heron rookeries to vernal pools containing rare and endangered plants.

What is it?
It is the Laguna de Santa Rosa, an oblong rectangular piece of land east of Sebastopol from Colati to the Russian River composed of gentle hills, floodplain and a stream.

A major tributary of the lower Russian River, the laguna is most visible during the winter, when it serves the important function of flood control. As the 1977 Laguna de Santa Rosa" report states, "When the flow of the Russian River at its confluence with the Laguna de Santa Rosa is greater than 9000 cubic feet per second (cfs), Russian River water moves into the Laguna, retarding or reversing the Laguna flow...In most major storms, the Laguna simply deepens like a lake."

Recently, the laguna has become a focal point among local environmentalists concerned with potential development encroaching on the laguna.

Just last month, the Sebastopol City Council approved a condominium project on a piece of farmland east of Palm Drive Hospital which narrowly skirts the Laguna.

Sebastopol resident, Dennis Machado, an appropriate horticulturalist, was one of the people who opposed that project for environmental reasons.

This month, the council will review the Environmental Impact Report for the proposed "Route E" easierly bypass of Sebastopol, a non-stop road that would be built over part of the laguna.

Bill Cox, a Sebastopol resident and aquatic biologist with the State Fish and Game, recently attended a meeting of the "Environmental Forum," a group of local people who are putting together an educational slide show on the laguna.

Regarding the condo project, Cox stated: "I don't like it, but it's high enough up the slope that it's not

going to affect the wetlands."

On the bypass, however, he was more emphatic: "The bypass should be kept as far away from the laguna as possible," he said. "There has to be a permanent guarantee against development on the east side (of the bypass). Without that, it's an environmental catastrophe."

In order to understand the viewpoint of Fish and Game experts and environmentalists, it is necessary to understand the history of the laguna and its delicate interaction with the wildlife and plants it nurtures.

An historian writing in the July 3, 1895 edition of the Times wrote about the laguna: "Time was when the lovely Russian River, instead of hewing its way to the ocean, west from Guerneville to Duncans Mills, flowed south through what is now a peaceful lagune many miles in the area, past the present site of Sebastopol to Petaluma Creek."

According to Cox and others, it is highly likely that the laguna was once the channel for the Russian River to drain into San Pablo Bay to

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Cox noted that the Russian River Valley is extremely broad, indicating that the river has moved back and forth over time like the Yang-tze River in China.

According to the 1977 study on the laguna, it was probably a geological disturbance that later "blocked the Laguna-Russian River exit to San Pablo Bay, creating a low-gradient, northerly flowing stream course — the Laguna de

Santa Rosa.

Since rivers often leave gravel beds below, this theory would also explain why Sonoma County is blessed with plentiful underground aquifers to supply natural irrigation to its fruit trees and vines.

According to recent studies, the laguna area once served as a rich source of food and resources to the original inhabitants of the county; the Pomo Indians.

Development began after 1837, when a smallpox epidemic decimated the native population and allowed Spain to gain a foothold in the area. Land grants entitled "Ranchos" were later awarded by the Mexican government.

As development continued, the Santa Rosa plain began to produce hay, grains, beef, dairy products and fruits. The surplus agricultural products were taken to San Francisco along newly constructed trails.

Around 1900, oral history revealed there was enough water in the laguna to take a boat from Sebastopol to Rohnert Park.

According to Cox, there were also "sizable lakes" found at River Road, where ladies with parasols boarded steam launches for Sunday excursions.

With the increasing use of agriculture over time, however, channels of the laguna have been deepened, causing a loss of overall water in the laguna area. The channelization was done to speed up drainage of the surrounding land in order to lengthen cultivation time.

"The channel defines and lowers the streambed and allows more rapid drainage," the 1977 Laguna de Santa Rosa report states. "Much of the wetlands have been lost."

In addition, the channels need to be dredged every three to five years, a process which necessitates the removal of marsh plants such as cattails and willows.

According to Cox, the water quality in the laguna is very poor at