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Kim Cordell

Laguna Park a potential source of 'eco-tourist' \$\$

by John B. Burns

Prompted by Sebastopol business leaders who see the Laguna de Santa Rosa as a potential tourist attraction, the Sebastopol City Council next week will consider appointing a committee to help transform plans for Laguna Park into a reality.

According to Jeff Edelheit, chairman of the Sebastopol Chamber of Commerce Economic Opportunities Committee, the potential "is great" for utilizing the city's future nature park as a visitor destination similar to the way in which the Arcata Marsh and Wildlife Preserve near Eureka has drawn thou-

sands of visitors to that community.

Edelheit, along with Chamber Environmental Committee chairman Michael Kyes and others, believes the city's planned nature park on the eastern edge of town could become both an environmental and economic boon by restoring, protecting and showcasing a portion of Northern California's second largest freshwater marsh system.

A recent meeting—during which 35 business leaders, environmental activists, civic and political leaders assessed the proposal—led to a recommen-

dation by the Chamber's board of directors that the city appoint an "implementation committee" to further "development of the Laguna Park as a year-round visitor attraction, promoting the business community as a destination to visitors..."

The Chamber has suggested the committee include representatives from the City of Sebastopol, the Chamber, and the Laguna Foundation which was established several years ago to protect and preserve what is widely viewed as one of the county's most valuable natural resources.

Said Edelheit, "The Laguna

Park project meets most of the wish lists of the business and civic leaders of the community. These include protecting our natural resources, increasing sales tax revenues without over-commercialization, and encouraging people to see Sebastopol as a destination point."

Sebastopol Mayor Anne Magnie, who helped spearhead the Laguna Park concept in the late 1980s, agrees.

"It seems to be a win-win situation" for residents, businesses, and the numerous species of plants, animals and birds in the
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laguna itself.

Magnie said a committee—which would target funding sources to build the proposed amphitheater, interpretive trails, viewing areas and Visitors Center—would "add more elbow grease to the process" of establishing the park which has been in the planning stages since 1990. Last year, the city adopted a final master plan for the park, but little has been done since then because the city has no funding for the project.

Like Edelheit, Magnie be-

lieves the park has a high potential for drawing "eco-tourist" dollars to Sebastopol.

She cited the Arcata Marsh and the Audubon Canyon Ranch near Stinson Beach in Marin County as nature parks which draws thousands of tourists each year.

"People are expressing a need for natural places near urban areas. People want to maintain that connection with nature," said Magnie.

What is perhaps most remarkable about the concept is how it has brought together diverse members of the community who all agree on the project's worthiness.

"It's kind of refreshing, isn't it?" said Heidi Gillen, an aide to North Coast State Assemblyman Dan Hauser who is also supportive of the project.

"If there's something we can all agree upon it's the fact that we can (preserve and enhance) this resource and stimulate the economy at the same time," said Gillen.

Gillen, who noted that Hauser was the mayor of Arcata when the Marsh project was established there, said she planned to approach Hauser to explore possible ways in which

the state might support the project.

Gillen, a Sebastopol resident who also sits on the board of the county's Open Space Authority, also said there might be funding available through the Open Space District for the park's creation.

Kim Cordell, executive director of the Laguna Foundation, noted during a recent meeting that she was very supportive of a city committee that could help identify funding sources and surmount logistical hurdles on the path to the park's creation.

Said Cordell, "There is, surprisingly, a lot of money out there for these kinds of things."

The council is slated to review the proposed Laguna Park committee at its meeting next Tuesday evening at the Sebastopol Library.