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Palm Terrace drive clears hurdle with option payment

by Barry W. Dugan
Sonoma West Editor

SEBASTOPOL — The campaign to save a piece of the Laguna de Santa Rosa uplands from development reached a big milestone last week when organizers put up a \$10,000 option payment on the eight-acre property just off Walker Avenue.

The community effort to purchase the property known as

Palm Terrace also received another boost when the Ghilotti family, one of the owners of the land, donated \$15,000 toward the effort.

Organizers of the "Laguna Uplands Project" now have until April 15 to raise the remainder of the \$1.5-million purchase price, and they remain optimistic.

"The fact that the owner of the property is contributing to the campaign is significant," said

Bill Haigwood, one of the founders of the citizens committee established to buy the property. "But the fact that we put up the \$10,000 casts it in concrete. We've got the concrete poured for the foundation, now we have to build the rest of it."

The "foundation pouring" event, which consisted of a photo opportunity last week at the Palm Terrace site, included members of the committee. (Please see *Hurdle* page A9)



BARRY DUGAN

OPTION PLAY — Organizers of the Laguna Uplands Project posed with representatives of the property owners to celebrate an option agreement on the Palm Terrace property. Pictured from left to right: Joan Vilms, Charles Evans (property owners' representative), Janet Simpson, Dick Ghilotti (holding check), Tom MacKinney, Una Glass, Juliana Doms, Bill Haigwood and Kathy Oetinger.

Hurdle...

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Charles Evans, who represents the property owners, and Dick Ghilotti, representing the Ghilotti family.

"We want to be supportive, rather than be adversarial," said Ghilotti. "This has been a long ordeal. We just want to recover the investment (originally made by his family) ... whatever the community wants, we respect people's wishes. And if this is the way it's going to be, we want to make it happen."

The Palm Terrace property has had various plans for development submitted approved by the city of Sebastopol over more than a 10-year period, most of them controversial. A lawsuit against the city by the property owners, who sued over denial of a development plan, was recently settled when the latest development plans were approved.

At that point, a community effort was launched to buy the land and keep it from being developed. The committee envisions the site as the cornerstone of a restored Laguna wildlife habitat and the creation of a cultural center for Native American traditions.

The settlement of the lawsuit also opened the door to the possible participation of the county's Open Space District in

"We want to be supportive, rather than be adversarial."

—Dick Ghilotti

purchasing the land. Juliana Doms, who originally spearheaded the effort with Haigwood, said the property is undergoing an appraisal that will be used by the district to evaluate its feasibility as an acquisition project.

Doms said the signing of the option agreement with the landowners "makes it real. Now we're in our second phase and our confidence has not swayed at all. All systems are go."

She said the Ghilotti family's donation "will really help kick our second phase off."

The second phase of the campaign consists of contacting businesses and "major donors throughout Sonoma County," Doms said.

Committee member Joan Vilms acknowledged that the April 15 timeline for purchase of the property "is very tight. But the sellers are very supportive of this and want to see it happen. That has take a lot of doubt away ... with their support, anything is possible."