

Spat embroils bid to buy, preserve land on Laguna

Indian groups seek ownership

By CLARK MASON
Staff Writer

SEBASTOPOL — A campaign to raise \$1.5 million to preserve land next to the Laguna de Santa Rosa as open space has erupted into a controversy between environmentalists and Indian groups over who should own and maintain the property.

Some Indians and their supporters said they are getting only "token representation" in the campaign to buy the land. They suggest they be given title to the property.

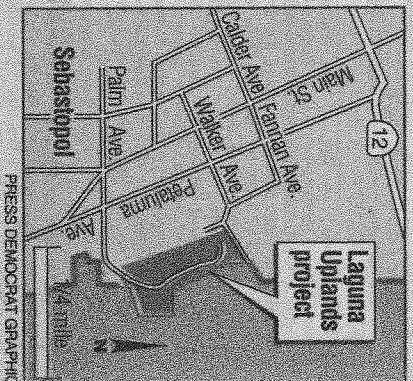
But organizers said that "would derail attempts to buy the land and keep it from being developed with 18 luxury homes."

One of the project's main goals is to develop a cultural center on the site highlighting the history of the Pomoos who once lived there. Indians said they want more assurance of participation, including designing and managing the cultural center and owning the land once money is raised to buy it.

Organizers of the effort to buy the land, known as the Laguna Uplands Project, said they are racing against a deadline to come up with the money to buy the property. They first want to buy the land, then work out the details on the cultural center. They said there is every intent to have a cultural center that is designed and managed by Indians.

LandWrights, the land conservancy working in conjunction with Laguna Uplands, has entered into an option agreement to buy the property, which is located just east of Palm Drive Hospital.

To deed the land to tribal members would threaten the fragile negotiations and looming deadline for buying the property, according to Juliana Doms, former Sebastopol City Council member and environmentalist who is co-chair of the project.



PRESS DEMOCRAT GRAPHIC

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**TIM CAMPBELL,
FEDERATED COAST
MIWOK TRIBE**

So far, along with the Sonoma County Open Space district's commitment of \$800,000, a total of \$975,000 has been raised toward the purchase of the eight acres of uplands. Environmentalists say it is a refuge for wildlife during floods and an integral part of the Laguna ecosystem.

Organizers need to come up with the balance of more than \$500,000 by April 15. That is the agreement they have with owners Yolanda Ghilotti and her family who own the property.

The Ghilottis and Sebastopol contractor George Young had planned to build 18 upscale homes on the land in a development known as Palm Terrace.

The controversy with Indian
See Laguna, Page B2

Laguna

Continued from Page B1

groups erupted unexpectedly at this week's Sebastopol City Council meeting when members of the Laguna Uplands Project asked for a resolution from the council backing the acquisition effort.

Project organizers were surprised that Indians had asked the City Council to put language in the resolution ensuring that they would eventually get title to the property.

Tim Campbell, a member of the Federated Coast Miwok tribe, said organizers of the project "keep invoking the name of Native Americans and say they're doing it for Native Americans. This was the perfect opportunity to back up what they were saying by putting language in."

Councilman Bill Roventini was the only council member to agree that American Indians should be the owners of the land and made a motion to that effect. He said he believed they were being left out of the process, something that environmentalists disputed.

Project members said Indians were not left out. Some did come to the meetings, they said, and others did not respond to invitations to become involved. Bill Halgwood, co-chair of the project, noted that tribes that are doing well financially with casinos have not been willing to sponsor the Laguna project.

"The casinos are a different world," replied Tio Beltrane, an American Indian who lives in Healdsburg. "I'm not saying give me this, give me that. We want respect."

The day after the council meeting, members of the Laguna Uplands Project were still upset that Roventini had not talked to them first about what they said were erroneous concerns that Indians were being left out of the process.

"If you have a position where you are attacking or accusing someone of doing something, you need to find out the truth before you do it as as an elected official. He has that responsibility," Doms said.

Roventini defended his decision to initially mention his concerns at the council meeting rather than calling Doms or other project members. "I conduct as much of my business in public as I can and that's exactly what I did," he said. "I felt the true and proper place to air this was in front of God and attorney."

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