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\$900,000 approved for Sebastopol land

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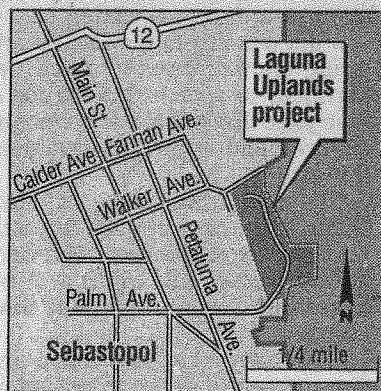
Members of the Sonoma County Open Space Authority narrowly approved a \$900,000 expenditure Thursday night to preserve eight acres on the fringes of Sebastopol and prevent an 18-home development from being build on the land.

The 3-2 decision, which still needs to be ratified by the Sonoma County Board of Supervisors, was cheered by a coalition of citizens that launched a last-ditch effort to preserve the land just when the housing development appeared inevitable.

Heidi Gillen, chair of the Open Space Authority, said the \$900,000 will buy a conservation easement to keep the land protected forever, "for the people who follow us."

"It protects wetland and wild-life. It meets every requirement we look for in a piece of land," she said.

Authority members Bob Anderson and Fred Euphrat voted with Gillen to allocate the money, but Charles Cooke and Alfred Alys



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dissented out of concern that the price was too high and that the City of Sebastopol is not contributing any matching funds.

While the city is not contributing, a coalition known as the Laguna Uplands Project is in the process of raising \$600,000 more in donations. They plan to combine that with the \$900,000 open space allocation for a total of \$1.5 million to purchase the 8.4 acres.

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The coalition is working with the non-profit LandWrights land conservancy, which has an option to buy the land from owner Jim Ghilotti and his family and contractor George Young.

The property, known as Palm Terrace, is adjacent to the Laguna de Santa Rosa and is considered the last vestige of Laguna uplands within city limits where animals seek refuge during winter flooding.

Proponents for preservation of the land, including members of the Sebastopol City Council, say it will provide public access to the Laguna and adjoins 1,500 acres that are already in public domain and owned either by state Department of Fish and Game, or the City of Santa Rosa.

Another adjacent property known as Saddleburr, once proposed for housing, is also being acquired by the open space district.

The district, created by voters in 1990 and funded with a ¼-cent sales tax, has preserved more than

15,000 acres over the last five years.

Palm Terrace has been subject to controversy for 15 years, when development was initially proposed. The latest flap involves a fight between environmentalists and Indians over who should get title and maintain the property once the money is raised to preserve it.

When organizers of the campaign to preserve Palm Terrace launched their effort last fall, they spoke of the importance of the land to the Pomo who once lived there and the need to build a Native American Cultural Center to honor that history.

But some Indians and their supporters recently complained that in recent months they have been left out of the process and received only token representation in the campaign. Indians demanded title to the land once a conservation easement is obtained to preserve it.

On Thursday, they asked the Open Space Authority to postpone a decision on whether to authorize the \$900,000 until the question of title to the property is settled.