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# Open space effort wins in Sebastopol

By CLARK MASON Staff Writer

The proposed Sebastopol housing subdivision known as Palm Terrace becomes history today thanks to a community drive to raise more than \$1 million and keep the property as open space.

Escrow closed on the transaction Thursday, signaling success for organizers of the Laguna Uplands Project who struggled to raise the funds to buy the land and keep 18 upscale homes from being built there.

The sales deed is scheduled to be recorded this morning, making it official.

"The credit goes to the tremendous support that people have given us and expressed on their own because of their connection to this land and its connection to the Laguna de Santa Rosa," said Joan Vilms, head of LandWrights, the land trust organization that takes title to the property. The campaign to save the eco-

logically sensitive land next to the Laguna began seven months ago after the City Council settled a lawsuit with the developer allowing the subdivision.

The fund drive was boosted by a \$900,000 contribution from the Sonoma County Open Space District, but organizers also raised \$125,000 in the community, mostly in the west county.

In addition to a few individual donations ranging between \$5,000 and \$20,000, hundreds of people pitched in for the cause, which began when political opposites Bill Haigwood, a conservative newspaper columnist, and environmentalist Juliana Doms joined forces to save the property.

"There were dances, bake sales, kids collecting pennies, businesses donating a percentage from sales, jars in Sebastopol for people to drop change," Vilms said.

She also credited Palm Terrace owner Jim Ghilotti for his willingness to save the property. *See Space, Page B3*

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ness to work with organizers and close escrow even though they fell about \$35,000 short of the money they needed by May 1 to obtain a conservation easement under the terms of the transaction.

Ghilotti also agreed to lower the purchase price from the previously agreed upon \$1.5 million to \$1,350,000, the more recently appraised price for the eight acres.

The Laguna Uplands Project still has an obligation to pay the Ghilottis approximately \$35,000 more in the next two months and an additional \$300,000 in the next three years. But even if they can't raise the money, the conservation easement will remain in place. Under terms of the note, the land would then revert back to the Ghilottis, but the open space provision would remain.

"The subdivision is wiped out," Vilms said. "We still have a financial obligation we will honor, but the big work is done."

"The Ghilottis deserve tremendous credit," she said. "We fully intend to perform on the note, but they are taking a risk."

Vilms said private foundations are expected to contribute in the next few years to make up the remainder of funds required to meet the terms of the sale.

Jim Ghilotti said Thursday he and his family will not come anywhere close to recouping their investment, but decided to sell because "our heart was not in building a project the community didn't want."

He said his late uncle Dino brought the property eight years ago thinking the necessary approvals for construction were already in place. "He thought he would be providing housing to people. It was never his intent to get involved with a controversial piece of property," said Ghilotti, who manages the family's Santa Rosa construction company.

Ghilotti said Sebastopol contractor George Young and his wife, Marleen, who owned one-third of Palm Terrace, were bought out several weeks ago.