

Open Space funds boost Laguna campaign

by Marsha Trent
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SEBASTOPOL — Community efforts to save slightly more than eight acres of Laguna de Santa Rosa upland from development got a \$900,000 shot in the arm this week from the Sonoma County Agriculture and Open Space District.

Thanks to the offer from the Open Space District to pay for a conservation easement on the property, located behind Palm Drive Hospital and to the south of Walker Avenue, local residents need raise only about \$600,000 to buy the land, said Joan Vilms, one of the area residents involved in fundraising.

Vilms said the Open Space District's offer to buy the conservation easement from the citizens raising money for the Laguna Uplands project was accepted this week, but that means only that grass roots fundraising must intensify in order to purchase the land for the \$1.5-million asking price.

The project group, spearhead-

ed by realtor and Sonoma West Times & News columnist Bill Haigwood and environmentalist Juliana Doms, began fundraising efforts in several segments of the local community last year in a effort to save the property from

into 12 residential lots and in phase two, additional hearings on a plan to develop slightly less than one acre into six residential lots. The initial \$10,000 was used to secure a purchase option on the property.

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residential development buy purchasing it. The site known as Palm Terrace is owned by CGY Investment.

At the outset, the citizens group received two private donations totalling slightly more than \$10,000 shortly after it was formed in October. The grassroots effort to buy the property followed City Council approval of a lawsuit settlement that included re-hearings of plans to develop just over seven acres of the parcel

Thus far the citizen group has raised an additional \$9,000, Vilms said, bringing the total raised through private individual donations to just under \$20,000.

The first of two \$25,000 payments on the option agreement comes due Feb. 15. The second \$25,000 payment is due March 15. At the same time the Sebastopol City Council conducted a public hearing at its Feb. 6 meeting on an appeal of the planning commission's denial of phase two of the

development plan.

Vilms said efforts to enlist "major" individual donors which began this week are expected to bring in enough to make the February payment.

Project volunteers are also soliciting donations from local business and industry.

There will be a special effort directed at Palm Drive Hospital, Vilms said.

Project organizers had sought the full purchase price of the property from the Open Space District, Vilms said, but the \$900,000 for a conservation easement will suffice.

"Without that the deal is dead," she said, although it may place some restrictions on how elaborate a Native American cultural center proposed for the site can be.

The Open Space District will work as a direct partner with the Laguna Uplands project organizers to decide what will be built at the site.

"We know we are going to restore habitat on most of it," said Vilms.