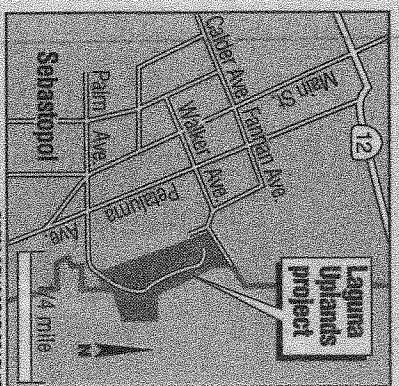


97.2  
**SEBASTOPOL**  
**Laguna**  
**preserve**  
**project**  
**falls short**

By CLARK MASON  
Staff writer  
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Last year, with much ballyhoo and fanfare, Palm Terrace, an eight-acre piece of land on the eastern fringe of Sebastopol, was preserved as open space after a last-minute fund drive that kept 18 homes from being built on the property.

Along with a community effort that raised \$125,000, the county open space district's contribution of \$900,000 ensured a conservation easement on the land to keep it open space forever.



But because organizers of the fund drive failed to raise another \$350,000 necessary to secure title to the land, the promised public access to the property now is in jeopardy.

Those who were involved in the effort to preserve it say the important thing is that the ecologically sensitive land next to the Laguna de Santa Rosa will not be developed.

But because LandWrights, a land trust organization, was unable to raise the remaining money as planned to gain title, Palm Terrace has reverted back to the original owners, the Ghilotti family.

Jim Ghilotti, spokesman for the family, said Friday, "there is no intention of doing anything with the property at this time except leaving it in its natural state."

But he said the public will not be allowed on it, something that was promoted by organizers in their push to raise money to save the land from construction.

"If anyone goes on it now and gets hurt, we could potentially be

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JOHN BURGESS/PRESS DEMOCRAT

*Aerial view looking southeast over the eight-acre open space site near the Laguna de Santa Rosa. Public access to the land, east of Sebastopol, is in jeopardy.*

## Laguna

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hable," Ghilotti said. "We don't consider it to be an open piece of property."

The project was supposed to not only preserve the land but turn it into a showcase for the Laguna's natural resources and an essential link to Sebastopol's planned Laguna trail.

Because it was once part of a large Indian village and may contain burial remains, it also was discussed as a potential site for some type of Indian cultural center.

The donations for the so-called Laguna Uplands Project came from hundreds of people who pitched in for the cause. Along with a few large donations, there were dances, bake sales and jars all over town where people dropped their spare change.

For now, at least, Ghilotti said there will be no public access. But he said that could change if some organization comes forward and wants to take title and manage the land. He indicated they may have to come up with some of the remaining \$350,000.

"If someone came to us someday with a portion of those funds, we'd be more than happy to work with them if it's an organization that has resources and ability to manage the property," he said.

There are also tax benefits to simply deeding the property to such an organization, but Ghilotti declined to comment on that possibility.

He said the owner of the property, his aunt, Yolanda Ghilotti of San Rafael, was not happy with getting title to the land back and getting about \$350,000 less than anticipated.

While backers of the open space

drive got their wish, he said "unfortunately, the only person who came up short is Yolanda."

He said now the family has to pay taxes on the land, worry about liability and maintain it.

"We are not happy being back in the picture. The last thing we wanted to do was have title to the property," he said.

Joan Vilms, head of LandWrights, said Friday she was disappointed that her organization was unable to raise more money to meet the conditions of the note that would have allowed it to take title.

"LandWrights was acting on behalf of the community all along," she said. "The enthusiasm for the project was to stop the subdivision. Once that was achieved, there was little interest to go forward and pay off the note. People just disappeared."

The Ghilottis in effect agreed to allow the conservation easement to be placed on the land in exchange for slightly over \$1 million, even though the title would not be conveyed to LandWrights until the full \$1,350,000 was paid.

Vilms said if the Ghilotti family had been more "cutthroat" they could have waited until all the money had been raised before allowing the conservation easement. "They showed their community spirit every step of the way and they've continued to show it," she said.

Vilms also blamed a lawsuit filed by an American Indian for affecting fund raising. The lawsuit sought to ensure detailed environmental studies before any cultural center or limited development would be allowed on the land.

The suit was thrown out in January, but Vilms said it affected the ability to raise more money.