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New golf course by laguna weighed

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Santa Rosa is moving ahead with plans for a second city golf course, this one just a nine-iron shot from Sebastopol and a chip shot away from the wildlife-rich Laguna de Santa Rosa.

But the proposal is likely to prompt a fight with environmentalists who want to preserve the laguna's 30-square-mile flood plain, considered valuable enough to be twice proposed for a national wildlife refuge.

"We're not opposed to golf, but you can't have golf balls and nesting birds in the same location," said Bill Haigwood, a member of the Laguna de Santa Rosa Foundation, a group dedicated to the preservation and restoration of the laguna.

Santa Rosa's City Council next Tuesday will consider moving ahead with environmental studies and design work that could turn the 318-acre Kelly Farm, which sits next to Sebastopol's eastern edge and the laguna, into an 18-hole golf course.

Kelly Farm is an island of land purchased and annexed by Santa Rosa in the 1970s as part of its massive wastewater-disposal program.

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Chuck Rust, Santa Rosa's recreation and parks director, said that if the council decides to proceed Tuesday the design and environmental portions of the project could be put out to bid by January.

Rust said the total cost to build the golf course, estimated at between \$7 million and \$8 million, would be paid with profits from the city's Bennett Valley Golf Course, the most heavily played course in Sonoma County.

Kelly Farm emerged as the city's top choice for a second course last year after the city abandoned plans to expand its 18-hole Bennett Valley course to 27 holes. Bennett Valley Golf Club members argued the city would be wasting its money by adding only nine holes.

Environmental constraints made it hard for the city to expand Bennett Valley beyond nine holes, so a city golf course committee began evaluating 16 sites and

See Golf, Page B2

B2

THE PRESS DEMOCRAT, W

Golf

Continued from Page B1

arrived at Kelly Farm as the best choice.

But Kelly Farm also has environmental problems because it is located in the midst of the laguna's natural flood plain.

"We're not trying to make a national park out of it, but if people realize its importance to the ecology of the region, there'd be a less of an effort to develop it," Haigwood said.

The 13-mile-long laguna and its

flood plain stretches from Rohnert Park to Forestville. It is home to nearly 300 species of plants, more than 200 types of birds, 19 different mammals and twice was unsuccessfully proposed to become a national wildlife refuge.

Despite the expected environmental opposition, there is some potential west county support for the course.

Sebastopol Mayor Sam Crump said his council has not yet taken a position on the issue, but there could be some benefit to both cities and laguna preservationists if it is built.

"The knee-jerk response for

environmentalists is this would be a bad thing," Crump said. But Crump said a report prepared by environmental consultant Marco Waaland contends that a golf course actually could enhance the area's ecology by furthering restoration efforts on the borders of the course.

The report, released in June 1996, concludes that Kelly Farm has enough land to build a full-size, 180-acre golf course while still providing a large enough buffer to protect the laguna and wetlands from its impacts.

Crump said if the environmental issues can be resolved, the course
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