

EMPIRE NEWS

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Gift of Laguna ends years of talks

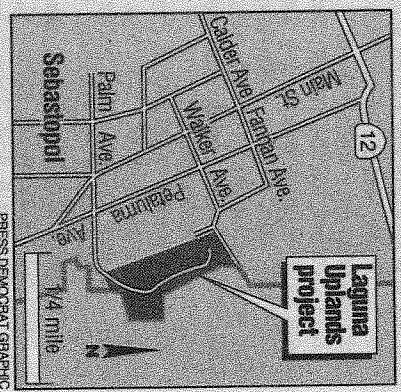
Uplands near Sebastopol to be preserved

By BOB KLOSE
Staff writer

Tenacity, an alliance of political opposites, and a Christmas Eve gift worth about \$330,000 have combined to secure forever a fragile piece of Laguna de Santa Rosa.

Chilotti Construction, which originally wanted to put 18 homes on the Laguna Uplands east of Palm Drive Hospital in Sebastopol, ended years of negotiation and litigation a few days before the new year when it gave the 8.4 acres to Laguna de Santa Rosa Foundation.

"It was a Christmas gift and a perfect ending and a great way to start the new year," said Juliana Doms, who along with Bill Haig-



LAGUNA UPLANDS PROJECT
PRESS DEMOCRAT GRAPHIC

wood completed the final push to guarantee the uplands will be preserved for wildlife and made part of a park.

"All of us are walking on the ceiling," said Haigwood, president of the foundation. "The Chilottis' gift has to be one of the most magnificent gifts of the generation."

The sloping hillside site, bordered by Walker Road and Palm Drive, offers an unbroken view of

the Laguna, across the Santa Rosa Plain to Mount St. Helena. It is one of the only remaining stretches of uplands that is not developed or earmarked for development, and it will become part of the 13-mile-long Laguna conservation and park project.

"The gift of the uplands gives us a quantum leap forward toward our goal of restoration and preservation of the Laguna," Haigwood said.

For Chilotti Construction, the donation ends nearly 10 years of headaches, lawsuits and negotiations that began when it bought the property. Chilotti abandoned construction plans several years ago and agreed to sell its development rights and the property for about \$1.3 million.

In 1996, the Sonoma County Open Space District paid \$900,000 to buy the development rights, and the Chilottis entered into a three-year agreement with the land trust organization LandWrights under which LandWrights would pay off



MARK ARONOFF/PRESS DEMOCRAT

Juliana Doms and Bill Haigwood take in the beauty of Laguna Uplands. Their efforts helped secure the property for the Laguna de Santa Rosa Foundation.

the remaining cost of the acquisition.

Though LandWrights raised \$125,000 toward the purchase, community financial support was

vered and the organization fell behind in payments.

"So we had to foreclose," said Jim Chilotti, company general manager. See Laguna, Page B3