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Sonoma West Times & News May 20-26, 1998

B2 DISCOVERIES • Sonoma West Times & News • May 20, 1998

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EDITORIAL

Laguna school site not worth the battle

It should be perfectly clear to officials at the Sebastopol Independent Charter School following last week's Sebastopol Union School Board meeting that plans for a school in the Laguna are ill-fated and that the wisest course of action is to pursue other sites for a permanent school site.

If it wasn't apparent to charter school leaders before the meeting that there is staunch opposition to any development of the Saddleburr property, it certainly should be now.

Even before environmentalists stood to voice fervent opposition to the school plans, school trustees expressed their displeasure with the Independent Charter School's failure to keep them apprised of their plans. Trustees also bemoaned school officials' lack of awareness in considering a location that was so environmentally and politically sensitive in the community.

Independent Charter School Director Greg Haynes told school trustees that it was their hope to develop a school site in a manner that was sensitive to the Laguna's delicate environment. While there is no reason to doubt the intentions and motives of those hopes, Laguna advocates left no doubt that any development on that piece of land is contrary to the goals of restoration and preservation of the Laguna de Santa Rosa.

Timing is another contributing factor to the unpopularity of the Charter School's proposal. The property in question, adjacent to the Palm Terrace uplands property recently acquired by the Laguna de Santa Rosa Foundation, is considered a key link in the city of Sebastopol's plans for a Laguna Park. City officials, with support from the county Open Space District, have been negotiating to purchase open space easements over the property. While property negotiations are competitive and the Charter School has every right to look out for its own interests, the timing of their accepted offer for the Saddleburr land gives the appearance of undermining the city's efforts to preserve this land forever as open space.

We empathize with the Sebastopol Independent Charter School's need for a permanent school site. Charter schools enjoy many freedoms as independent public schools, but are at a clear disadvantage in terms of funding for permanent school sites.

Beyond their legal responsibilities and obligations to the local school district, however, the Charter School is a member of the Sebastopol community and must take into consideration the needs and sensitivities of the larger community as it searches for a permanent home. That search will benefit greatly from community support, which will come if the school's goals are in line with the community's.

Pursuing the Saddleburr property will surely involve opposition from many individuals in the community and no doubt engender a tremendous amount of ill will toward the Charter School. It is a battle that is not worth waging.

—B.W.D.