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Charter School drops Laguna site

by Barry W. Dugan
Sonoma West Editor

SEBASTOPOL — Plans to build a school on 31 acres in the Laguna de Santa Rosa have been dropped by the Sebastopol Independent Charter School.

The school had made an offer on the land, known as the Saddleburrr property, and had its offer accepted in April of this year. The property is a key piece in the city of Sebastopol's efforts to complete a Laguna Park, and is considered by Laguna preservationists as an integral property in preserving open space along the waterway.

When the Charter School's plans were announced in April, Sebastopol Union School officials were caught by surprise and urged Greg Haynes to drop the controversial project.

"We've dropped the plans," said Haynes, the school's director. "The Sebastopol School District told us to ... we have to maintain a good relationship with them ... we are disappointed, to say the least. We've been looking for a site for four years and we thought that this site appeared to meet our

our needs, but we never had a chance to even present our plan."

Haynes said the K-3 school, which plans to eventually expand to a K-8 program by adding a grade per year, had envisioned an environmentally sensitive project "that those who were interested in preserving the Laguna could support."

School district officials and Laguna advocates praised the Charter School's decision.

"I commend the Sebastopol Charter School for deciding not to pursue their plans for a school on the Laguna," said Bill Haigwood, president of the Laguna de Santa Rosa Foundation. "We will support their efforts to find a school site in the Sebastopol area, as long as it is not in the Laguna."

The 31-acre Saddleburrr property has been the subject of numerous battles over development in the past. About half the land is in the 100-year flood plain, and half in the uplands.

It is adjacent to the city of Sebastopol, just south of Palm Drive, and is contiguous with the 17-acre Palm Terrace property. (Please see Laguna page A8)

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erty, another disputed piece of land that was donated earlier this year to the Laguna Foundation by the Chliott family. The Palm Terrace property will be part of the city's Laguna Park. The Saddleburrr property is seen as a key link in completing a linear park along the Laguna.

City officials have been negotiating with the property owner to acquire open space easements on the land, a process that was interrupted by the Charter School's offer.

City Manager Paul Berlant said it was good news that the Charter School had backed off from its development plans.

"That's good," he said. "If this is confirmed, maybe the landowners are more interested in our offer now. We, and the Open Space District, still have an interest in it."

The Sebastopol Independent Charter School operates under the auspices of the Sebastopol Union School District. The district first approved the school's charter and must renew it every five years as its sponsoring district. School Board members were taken aback when they found out about the Charter School's plans for the Laguna site by reading it in a newspaper story.

At two subsequent board meetings in May and June, they urged Haynes to find a school site elsewhere. Board President Mike Long said "Our school

district will be very relieved that they are not going to pursue that (Saddleburrr) property ... we don't want to take on that one."

District Superintendent Ken Ranella said "I think Mr. Haynes sees the writing on the wall in terms of that property ... I think (the decision) is appropriate considering the community's response to the school's plans and considering the efforts that have been made in the Laguna and the strong sense of preservation for that area."

Helen Shane, a city Planning Commissioner and environmental activist, said she was "very happy that the Sebastopol Independent Charter School has withdrawn its interest in purchasing Saddleburrr as a site for their campus. The school that,

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