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Debates portray a political mix of old and new

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West County activists continued to pursue progressive political solutions last year while remaining true to the agricultural and natural resources they believe will sustain the West County's quality of life.

It was a year that saw a community push for a Russian River Task Force and a River Redevelopment District to fight the area's blight and rejuvenate tourism, which officially became part of the county's three economic cornerstones along with agriculture and high technology.

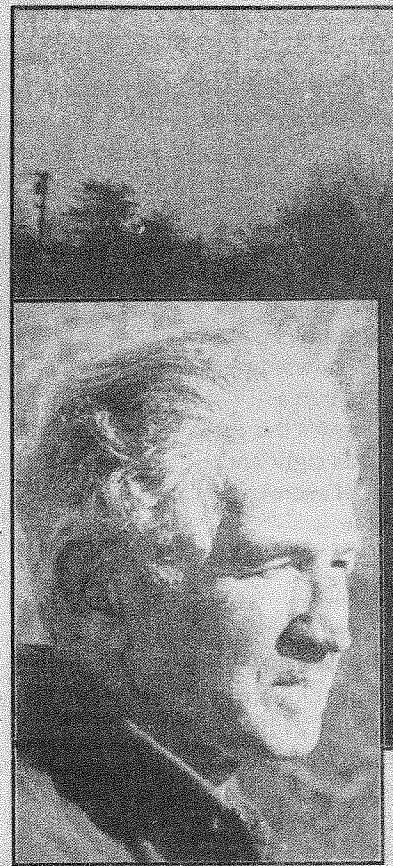
It was a year that saw the dismantling and rebuilding of county tourism promotion efforts and the establishment of the new Sonoma County Tourism Agency that will be expected to guide the county's booming visitor-serving industry into the next century.

One of the innovative attractions visitors will be able to experience is Sebastopol's Laguna de Santa Rosa wetlands preserve that this year went from planning stages to actual implementation.

"These are landmark events," Sebastopol planning Director Kenyon Webster told the City Council in October as he outlined the scope of Laguna park work to be completed this year.

In November and December dozens of volunteers turned out to plant several hundred native trees in the 80-acre nature preserve that planners hope will someday encompass most of the remaining Laguna wetlands that run from Cotati to Forestville.

The Laguna park progress was enabled by a \$200,000 donation from Emmett Blincoe, a retired building contractor



WETLANDS CASH — The plan to build a wetlands park in the Laguna de Santa Rosa (above) was given a financial booster shot when Emmett Blincoe (at left) donated \$200,000 to the project, in memory of his late wife, Loretta. His donation prompted the Sebastopol City Council to allocate \$80,000 for completion of the project's next phase, drafting a design plan.

who surprised and delighted Laguna park supporters last January when he donated the park funds in memory of his wife, Loretta Blincoe.

"I am stunned," said Sebastopol Mayor Kathy Austin when the announcement was made.

The donation spurred a divided City Council to approve spending nearly \$80,000 on design plans for the Laguna Park's next phase.

West County residents demonstrated during the past year that they are willing to put their money where their ideals are. Voters in April overwhelmingly renewed a \$39 annual parcel taxes for another seven years to benefit the West Sonoma County High School District and the Sebastopol Union School District.

The school tax plan passed

with more than the needed two-thirds vote on a campaign theme of "show them the benefits."

More than 72 percent of the voters supported Measure A, which renewed a West C Sonoma County High School District parcel tax of \$12. In the Sebastopol Union School District more than 75 percent of the voters approved a \$27 parcel tax.

The parcel tax was approved after a surprising defeat a year ago in November when a professional political consultant was hired to run the campaign.

This second time around there was no consultants. "We did it ourselves this time and we did it right," said Heidi Gillen, a West County High School trustee who worked on the campaign.

In contrast, advocates of a

half-cent sales tax hike to pay for major county transportation projects were unable to convince voters of the benefits of using sales tax revenues for a wider freeway.

Voters in November rejected the proposed half-cent sales tax hike that would have funded big-ticket urban transportation projects, mainly to widen Highway 101 and create a commuter rail service from Windsor to Marin County.

One message of the defeat was that a lot of residents do not choose to live in Sonoma County yearning to be surrounded by San Jose-style urban sprawl.

"Could it be that voters value open space, agriculture, environmental protection and small-town neighborhoods over Highway 101 improvements?" asked a Sonoma West editorial.

The rejection of the freeway tax was made all the more conspicuous by the simultaneous passage of two urban growth boundary measures to limit sprawl in Cotati and Petaluma.

Closer to home, the first choice of Sebastopol voters, who were selecting from six City Council candidates, was Larry Robinson, who successfully campaigned for Sebastopol's Urban Growth Boundary.

Robinson's victory was helped out by the endorsement of Councilwoman Anne Magnie, who chose not to run again this year after serving three terms as the Council's strongest environmental voice.

As the new year begins another major decision weighs on the West County: how to save Palm Drive Hospital from its scheduled closing in two

weeks. And how to rescue it from the control of a huge and distant corporation and sustain it as the centerpiece of West County's community medical facilities.

As community members are asked to donate time and money to the Palm Drive rescue effort, "Show them the benefits" may again be the key to winning West County hearts and minds.

"We need to tell people where their money is going to go," to successfully gain support for Palm Drive, said Sebastopol Mayor Bill Roventini said this week.

"The upshot is people have to know what they are contributing to."

So far the community has slowly but surely rallied to meet the next challenge.