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COMMENTARY

The Year of
the Laguna?

by Bruce Robinson



Six weeks in, it's looking like 1998 could be a watershed year for the Laguna de Santa Rosa. In less time than it takes to reverse a voter referendum, we have seen two substantial, generous, and forward-looking donations meant to help preserve and protect the long-abused waterway.

The Chioitti family's final willingness to cede the contentious Palm Terrace property not only keeps a key section of the uplands habitat in its natural condition, but it may also become an important link in the proposed pedestrian trail network that the Laguna Park's proponents have long envisioned as a vital part of the park.

But the out-of-the-blue donation from Emmett Blincoe may well play an even more pivotal role in getting the park project moving forward again. The abrupt arrival of his \$200,000 donation (made in the memory of his late wife, who surely ought to be memorialized in some tasteful way within the park) prompted the City Council to finally take action on the stalled design process.

By releasing the \$78,000 needed to prepare detailed working drawings for the planned park, the council has opened the door to still more largess, as previously identified by numerous sources. Even the "Laguna de Santa Rosa Park Master Plan," prepared back in 1991, included an eight-page appendix listing funding programs that could potentially assist with various aspects of the park's creation. Of course, many of those sources are governmental programs that have likely changed over the past seven years, which raises the question of how much we have missed out on, due to the delays at City Hall.

In fairness, the mid-'90s have been bleak budgetary times on the home front, a factor that contributed significantly to the long delay. But the more recent politicization of the project is a distasteful development that has nothing to do with the widespread support the park continues to have within the community at large. At least the Council's actions in simultaneously moving forward with other park projects in Sebastopol should eliminate any possibility that competing recreational interests will have to duke it out for the dollars they all need.

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Moreover, Blincoe's gesture may well prove to be a prelude to more tangible monetary support for the park. He indicated in last week's brief interview with this paper that he will be encouraging others to follow suit; his example alone may serve as an inspiration. Surely the eventual presence of the Laguna Park will further distinguish Sebastopol as a hotbed of environmental awareness, a town flanked on both east and west by major parks that incorporate natural waterways.

This is good for more than local developers, of course. How long will it be, I wonder, before some enterprising entrepreneur sets up shop dispensing canoes, kayaks, binoculars, field guides, etc. to those who want to more deeply experience the natural wonders so close at hand.

The popularity of the Joe Rodota Trail, which traverses the Laguna as it leaves eastern Sebastopol, is one indication that local folks are eager to get closer to the resources of the community's doorstep. The tiers of steps on the east side of the new Sebastopol Teen Center are another signal that the long-term plan for a natural amphitheater in the one-time sewer ponds have not been forgotten.

The level of outcry over the latest (and presumably last) spill of locally-generated waste into the Laguna channel is yet another measure of the extent to which this rare wetlands is cherished. This time, even the Water Quality Control Board got into the act, which we must assume represents progress in some form.

And Mother Nature has once again asserted her influence, filling the basin with cleansing waters that will eventually recede, washing away still more garbage and pollution, and refreshing the habitat where growing numbers of wildlife are flourishing. El Niño or not, this looks to be one year in which maintaining healthy water levels for the Laguna's denizens should not be a problem.

So in the space of a few weeks, the Laguna has garnered protection for some key acreage, seed money for park development, renewed momentum in that development process, and these have combined to spur further interest in seeing it all come to pass.

Reason enough, it says here, to unofficially declare 1998 to be The Year of the Laguna in Sebastopol.

Make it so.

(Bruce Robinson is a Sonoma West Times & News staff writer)