

Laguna de Santa Rosa trail network proposed

Supervisors to receive plans for 2.4-mile first phase

By BLEYS W. ROSE
THE PRESS DEMOCRAT

Tuesday, December 5, 2006

Communing with nature of the sort that thrives in Laguna de Santa Rosa will be just a few steps away under new plans for trails designed for hikers, bicyclists and horseback riders.

Officials with the Agricultural Preservation and Open Space District are presenting county supervisors today with details for developing 2.4 miles of trails in Sonoma County's largest freshwater wetlands and host to endangered plant and animal species.

"With trails for a variety of users and overlooks with views of the Santa Rosa Plain and the Laguna's plants and animals, this enhances the public's appreciation of diverse natural resources," said Maria Cipriani, the open space district's assistant manager.

Long range plans for Laguna trails call for an eco-friendly network 12 miles long snaking through several farms owned by the City of Santa Rosa or under preservation easement restrictions with the Open Space District. As yet, there is no official cost estimate of the long range trail plan, although the first phase going to supervisors today has a price tag of \$1.3 million.

Right now, the public's primary acquaintance with the Laguna comes from the asphalt Joe Rodota Trail, which on a nice day can have all the intimacy of Sebastopol's busy Main Street.

"Most people's familiarity with the Laguna ends when they reach the Occidental Road bridge and wonder when the floodwaters are going over the roadway," said Dan Schurman, executive director of the Laguna de Santa Rosa Foundation, which conducts habitat restoration there. "For us, the trails are important because they give people a chance to see progress in restoration by improving access and visibility."

The foundation is developing a learning center in the Laguna that would be connected to proposed pedestrian trails, he said. It also is likely to conduct tours along the trails, Schurman added.

The Laguna trails would become a key link between the paved Prince Memorial Greenway that skirts Santa Rosa Creek and the Rodota Trail that currently peters out in Forestville.

About 1.8 miles of gravel paths would be designed for hiking, bicycling, horseback riding, walking leashed dogs and riding in wheelchairs. Another .6 miles of pathways

would be less than 4-feet wide, cleared of brush and reserved for pedestrians.

About \$500,000 is likely to come from the state Coastal Conservancy, a state agency that uses general obligation bonds to fund preservation projects. Its board is to consider the Laguna trails funding request in January. The Coastal Conservancy has funded similar projects along the Rodota Trail, Santa Rosa Creek and Sebastopol's Loop Trail through the Laguna as well as the foundation's riparian habitat restoration.

"Obviously, the Conservancy's strategic plan considers the Laguna de Santa Rosa a priority area," said Maxene Spellman, the Sonoma County project manager for the Coastal Conservancy. "It improves public access to open space in urban areas."

The Laguna serves as a catch basin for a 250-square-mile watershed stretching from Windsor to Rohnert Park and Forestville to Santa Rosa. It functions as a huge storage pond during heavy rains and flooding.

The county's Regional Parks Department would maintain the trails at an estimated annual cost of \$30,000.