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Council Keen to Decide Fate of Weeds

By Kia Penso, Sonoma West Times and News

SEBASTOPOL - With the approach of fall, the Sebastopol City Council is preparing to decide what to do next with the invasive pepperweed in the Laguna: Continue to allow volunteers to manually eradicate the weeds, or allow the spraying of herbicides.

They have asked for a report from the Pepperweed Project and they will also have a study session on Tuesday Aug. 23 out in the Laguna to look at the plants.

In February of this year, the Laguna de Santa Rosa Foundation's biologist, Anna Sears, asked the council to allow an exception to the city's no-spray policy to attack the aggressive plant. Several community members spoke out against the spraying and volunteered to get the plants out of the Laguna by pulling weeds and other non-spray methods.

Sears withdrew the request to spray and more than 100 volunteers took to the Laguna to attack the invasive plant, with the understanding that at the end of the summer, in September, the Pepperweed Project would review the results of its efforts and report to the city on their success.

At the council's July 19 meeting, Sears asked for a petition to support an application to the California Coastal Conservancy for a funding of some restoration efforts. This application contained language that left spraying invasive weeds as an option if the non-spraying methods had proved ineffective.

Controversy broke out over this application at the meeting. Magick, a Sebastopol activist who has been a strong advocate for the Pepperweed Project, complained of a lack of funding and support for the project. "This is a political move to open the door for spraying of the Laguna," she said.

Doug Emery, who has also been volunteering on the project, said he had gone into the project with high hopes and now felt like the bad stepchild. He noted that the Coastal Foundation had also granted funding for the Ludwigia plan, which includes spraying. "As a friend of the Laguna I don't support their mission, as it opens the door to herbicide spraying, enables dumping and makes us chemically dependent," he said.

Other community members said that before spraying could even be considered, a proper assessment of progress was necessary.

At the Aug. 2 meeting of the council, council members discussed the question of assessing the progress. Councilmember Craig Litwin, who is the liaison with the Pepperweed Project, was unable to attend because of his newborn twins.

At this Tuesday's meeting, Litwin gave a brief sketch of what was happening with the pepperweed.

Litwin said that the most successful method so far has been covering the pepperweed completely with sheets of cardboard. In places where he has pulled out the pepperweed it has grown back, but not in places where the cardboard has completely covered it.

"We should shift most of our efforts to sheet mulching at this time," he said.

But not all the pepperweed is accessible to sheet mulching. Some of it is growing in the midst of native plants like wild roses or sedges and grasses that would also be killed if a tarp or a sheet of cardboard were laid over them.

"There aren't that many areas where it's spread on the east side," he said. "The worst is when you turn left just across the bridge" near the baseball fields at Laguna Park.

Litwin also said that goats don't seem to work. Whether that meant they didn't like eating the pepperweed or preferred to eat more valuable plants was not clear. There were still plots of the weed that no one had adopted, and this was a concern as well.

Councilmember Sarah Gurney asked Litwin to interview project volunteers to get some idea of the time and resources it had taken them to make such progress as they had made with their individual plots.

Mayor Larry Robinson asked Litwin what he proposed to do about the unadopted plots.

"This is where it gets political," said Litwin. "I will not vote to spray. I will continue to do it in a non-chemical way. I suppose then I can put the neutral statement of fact that there may be votes on the council to spray, but I won't make arguments as to what would trigger spraying."

The report will be due at the first city council meeting of September. Once it has been reviewed, the council may revisit again the question of whether or not to spray.