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CLOSE TO HOME

It's our duty to protect the Laguna

By HELEN SHANE

To some, the Laguna de Santa Rosa is just empty space, prime for locating facilities for one faction or another.

In the past few years, Laguna supporters have had to fight off attempts to build a golf course, a school and two subdivisions. Skate-park enthusiasts wanted to locate there several years ago and recently renewed those efforts. At the time the Laguna Park Master Plan was devised, an area was set aside for teen activities. The choices were a teen center or a skate park. Because cities and counties were held to have the burden of liability for injuries suffered on public property (like a skate park) the teen center was selected instead — and because a center would attract a broader universe of youngsters.

Supervisor Mike Reilly and now Sebastopol City Councilman Bob Anderson encouraged this choice. Since then, the laws have changed, and local governments are now shielded from a good part of that liability for skate parks.

A Santa Rosa police rifle range in the Laguna de Santa Rosa is the most recent inappropriate scheme. The Police Department called a meeting in December to float the rifle range proposal. Only nearby Laguna property owners were invited.

Others heard about the threat, initially only by rumor. Word was spread by the Defenders of the Laguna. Responses included "You're kidding," "Are they nuts?" "That's absurd," "Bizarre," "Ludicrous." Out-

raged people let Santa Rosa officials know that a rifle range in the Laguna is totally unacceptable. The weekly Sonoma West later reported the meeting's cancellation, quoting a police sergeant's explanation: "We got the message loud and clear" of the deep concern for the Laguna's environmental sensitivity.

Given the facts, the value of this unique local resource and the responsibility of all of us for its well being will be evident, and inappropriate proposals for building in the Laguna will cease.

The Laguna de Santa Rosa is more than just a wet spot in the road from Santa Rosa to the beach. The name describes some 28,000 acres of wetlands, uplands and oak savannah, of which the city of Santa Rosa holds legal title to about 2,500.

The Laguna is the second largest coastal freshwater wetlands in Northern California. It runs from Rohnert Park to the Russian River. It acts as a safety valve, substantially reducing flood levels in towns along the river. With its complex topography, plant and wild life, it is one of the most diverse and beautiful wetlands anywhere.

The Laguna is an integral part of the the Pacific Flyway for migratory waterfowl. Birds don't merely fly over on their journeys north and south, they join year-round inhabitants and bathe and feed in the Laguna's waters and uplands. Protected steelhead trout migrate through the Laguna.

The Laguna is not just the area where water travels or pools, depending upon the season. In its waters and uplands

it nurtures some 600 species of plants and animals, including reptiles, amphibians and mammals. At least 14 plant and animal species in the Laguna are considered rare, threatened or endangered under state and federal laws.

The Laguna de Santa Rosa, honored and protected, could become an attractive ecotourism destination. The Laguna Park Master Plan is an important element of the general plan of the city of Sebastopol, which owns a small part of the Laguna. The Laguna Foundation, the caretakers of the Laguna and the city have begun to create trails to bring in respectful visitors, including schoolchildren and artists. Much of the planned trail system will be open only to tours accompanied by docent-interpreters, to guard against abuse of the Laguna and its inhabitants.

Every city that adjoins the Laguna must participate actively in its preservation. It is a place for learning and contemplation, strolling or hiking or creating art. It is a unique natural area where children and others can learn about life cycles and about the plants and animals of the Laguna.

The people and governments of this area have a choice. They can play a part in preserving the Laguna de Santa Rosa or in destroying it. They can earn credit for their stewardship or reap blame for robbing future generations of this irreplaceable, incredible resource. Informed decisions are long overdue.

Helen Shane is a member of Sebastopol's Laguna Park Implementation Committee.

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