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Laguna ecology

Public outcry over Route E

Public outcry against Route E this week made it clear that the controversial bypass proposed through the Laguna has little chance of being constructed — at least not in the 20th century.

Ecological issues such as noise and traffic versus wild birds and vernal pools this week appeared to have doomed the \$3 million two-lane highway envisioned on the

edge of the Laguna de Santa Rosa floodplain.

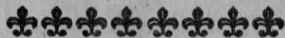
The proposed Route E would sacrifice the nature of the Laguna wetlands, all to the detriment of both wildlife and human life, according to speakers at a packed public hearing Tuesday before the Sebastopol Planning Commission.

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"I just don't think it will fly," said one man at Tuesday's gathering for public comment on the adequacy of the Route E impact report. The hearing attracted a partisan standing-room only crowd of united Route E opponents, including representatives from the Sierra Club and Audubon Society, as well as residents whose property would be condemned in "the take" of property for Route E's needed 100-foot right of way.

"These are our homes we're talking about, our life savings," said one resident of Cooper Road,



one of three optional starting points for the Route, which would divert Highway 116 traffic around Sebastopol.

If Route E is built, the needed right-of-way would require the city to buy a mobile home park, four single family houses, an apartment, four farm buildings and "portions of several greenhouses," according to the EIR prepared by Edgar Hill.

Major criticism of Hill's report this week was its lack of information on the bypass' impact north of Highway 12. Hill and officials have agreed the bypass won't work without a northern segment connecting Gravenstein Highway North with the southern bypass via Occidental and High School roads. "We need an EIR that covers the total project," said Planning Commission Chairman Marty Edwards.

Other critics, including the Audubon Society and Sierra Club spokesmen, feared the south-only bypass would be "but one

stage in a larger project." Concern over future development was also echoed by several local residents who questioned whether the temporary traffic relief promised by Route E is worth the price.

As proposed, Route E would divert 13,000 cars per day from Highway 116, although the year 2000 population growth would re-establish current levels of congestion at the intersection of Main Street and Bodega Avenue, says the EIR.

"Is it the responsibility of Sebastopol taxpayers to expend over \$3 million to save 95 seconds for motorists traveling through the city?" asked Sebastopol resident Ed Barnes.

Barnes, a retired engineer, told the commission that building a road which encroaches on the Laguna floodplain may violate federal flood laws. But Sebastopol city councilman Richard Johnson, in the audience at Tuesday's hearing, said the federal rules may only apply if federal grant money finances the project.

Route E or not, "Something has to be done" about downtown traffic tie-ups, said Johnson, who noted at a council meeting last week that public sentiment is overwhelmingly against the proposed north-south one-way street system, one alternative to Route E.

Asked whether he feels there is any public support for Route E, "At this point, no," said Johnson,

who said he was "very encouraged" by the public turnout at this week's planning commission hearing. "I wish we (the council) got crowds like this," said Johnson, commenting on both the quantity and quality of audience arguments, including the Sierra Club and Audubon presentations. "This is more than just emotion," said Johnson.

Also a member of Tuesday's audience was 5th District Supervisor Ernie Carpenter. "I'm here to listen to what the people have to say," said Carpenter, who said his office is also hearing from Route E opponents who are concerned about the ecology issue. "A lot of people care about the Laguna," said Carpenter. Route E's requirement of 10,000 cubic yards of fill to be added to the Laguna is provoking the most critical response to Route E among his constituency, said Carpenter. "My sense is that you will have an incredible number of people down here" to protest any landfill in the wetlands, said Carpenter.

Assuming Route E had popular support, financing its construction is another story, said Carpenter. Considering the current level of competition for construction money from other city and county projects, "I don't think Route E is financially feasible for the next 20 years," said Carpenter.