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Revised bridge plan awaits public debate

BY BRUCE ROBINSON

After five years, the county's Public Works Department is ready to try again.

The preparatory studies for a new bridge to carry Occidental Road across the Laguna de Santa Rosa are ready for review, and a pair of public hearings are scheduled for next month.

The three-phase project would begin with the reconstruction of the bridge and the approaches to it, with later portions involving improvements to the rest of the road from the bridge west to Highway 116. The first phase, with a projected price tag of \$1.105 million, is targeted for construction late next summer or in 1989.

This second version of the project has been scaled down somewhat from the \$2.6-million

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proposal that provoked outcry and opposition from environmentalists and others in 1982. Rather than elevating the span to the level of the highest flooding in 100 years, 15 feet above the existing roadway, as the earlier bridge design would have, the current design would lift the roadway only six feet higher, and keep the bridge at two lanes and in its present position.

The 240-foot concrete span would replace three wooden bridges that date back exactly 50 years, to 1937, according to Tim Mayer of the county Public Works Department.

"They've been a maintenance problem for the past 10 years," Mayer said of the aging, trestle-supported bridges. A Public Works maintenance engineer has "got it shored up, but he's not real happy with it," he added. Two winters ago, traffic had to be guided around a sizable storm-caused hole in the bridge roadbed until repairs could be made.

As the Public Works Department discovered five years ago, there are two major issues related to the rebuilding of the bridge. The larger one involves the infilling needed to support the roadbed as it approaches both ends

of the bridge. The draft Environmental Impact Report prepared for the project anticipates 60,000 cubic yards of dirt will be needed, although a little less than half will be used in the second phase of the work, which involves raising and improving the intersection of Occidental and High School Roads. No date has been set to begin that portion of the project, which has an estimated cost of \$200,000.

Long-time Laguna watcher Ed Barnes continues to cast a critical eye on the project. An outspoken critic of the earlier proposal, Barnes says the bridge planners have not considered the consequences of county Water Agency policies that "will do nothing but increase the runoff into the Laguna."

Looking out onto the expanse of the laguna from his High School Road home, Barnes warned that "Everything that's put into the laguna, including the bridge fill, will increase the flooding in the future."

Sebastopol's Laguna Advisory Committee has taken no formal position on the bridge project or the EIR, said committee member Richard Nichols. He noted that the proposed mitigation measures listed in the draft report include plans to restore the natural habitat in a five-acre area of the laguna near the bridge, and that native plants would be used to revegetate

the areas that are filled in.

"It's better than the typical rip-and-tear engineering mentality," Nichols said of the study. "I don't know if it's controversial yet."

Mayer is braced for criticism on the EIR. "I expect we'll get a lot of feedback," he said. "Projects there [in the laguna] tend to be controversial." Still, Mayer doesn't see any way to avoid the fill impacts. "The only alternative is a causeway, which is prohibitively expensive."

The other difficulty the bridge planners faced involved the discovery of an extensive Miwok Indian burial ground near the Occidental-High School Road junction. Since it was found, Mayer said his department has forged an agreement with Indians and historians over the path of the roadwork. "They're willing to accept that, based on the amount of data recovery work we've done out there already," Mayer said. An archaeologist has identified Indian remains in the area that date from 1600 A.D. back as far as 500 B.C.

The first public hearing on the draft EIR for the project will be held in the Sebastopol Veterans' Building at 7:30 p.m. on Thursday, Jan. 7.