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Stream protection measure urged

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BY BRUCE ROBINSON

As the Sebastopol City Council nears final action to protect, preserve and restore the Laguna de Santa Rosa, it is also being urged to enact similar measures to address the riparian corridors that flank the other, smaller streams that flow through the city to feed into the Laguna.

Sebastopol environmentalist Richard Nichols, a member of the city's Laguna Advisory Committee, provided the city council members with examples of ordinances from Marin County and the city of Tualatin, Washington, to serve as models for discussion of the idea. There are 10,000

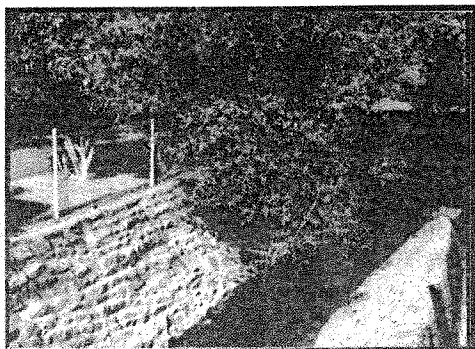


Photo by Jerry Well

CALDER CREEK—channelized and largely lifeless.

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to 15,000 such ordinances in force across the country, he estimated.

A riparian zone, Nichols said, can be defined as "a wetlands forest," providing habitat for a variety of wildlife as well as shade over a waterway. The Laguna is "a wetlands with riparian zones in it," he added.

There are three small creeks in or near Sebastopol that could be covered by a riparian ordinance. Zimpher Creek has been largely channelized and covered; it disappears into a deep culvert near Florence Avenue and emerges on the far side of Morris Street where it empties into the Laguna. Calder Creek is also buried underground as it crossed through downtown to the Laguna, but other portions are exposed and essentially undisturbed by nearby residential development. The creek is open but channelized as it flows through Ives Park. Atascadero Creek is the least impacted by urbanization as it runs north-south at the city's western boundary, draining the large open area at the rear of Ragle Ranch Park.

An ordinance dealing with the stream corridors would define a setback distance from the creek channel and identify activities which could and could not take place within that area. These should be "scaled to the size of the creek and the riparian zone," Nichols said, and could include such things as erosion control measures, plant protection, limits on construction and filling, and the creation of paths and bridges for "passive recreation."

The model laws in other communities often make a distinction between "wetlands and wetlands fringe areas" with differing degrees of protections in each, Nichols added.

He also suggested that the council might investigate funding sources that are available to finance "restoration and even uncovering of buried creeks where possible."

Nichols' proposals for a riparian ordinance were made in concert with suggestions he offered the council for strengthening the city's wetlands ordinance, which applies primarily to the Laguna. Councilman Nick Stewart is a staunch backer of the idea, and said that riparian protections should also be specifically included in the wetlands measure, too.

Mayor Anne Magnie agreed, but said, "I'd rather see us deal with the wetlands ordinance first," and quickly won council consensus on that sequence (see related story, page 1). No date was set for further consideration of a riparian ordinance.

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