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Sebastopol tomorrow

by Richard Nichols

The importance of the Laguna

It's a five-minute walk from downtown Sebastopol to a natural treasure unknown to many Sebastopol residents. Most people only know it as the dirty-looking water course running under the Highway 12 bridge, glimpsed at from speeding cars, or to many a youth it's the placid stream that eats baseballs on the other side of the fence at the Youth Park.

It is the Laguna de Santa Rosa, a 13-mile long 7,000 acre water course, marsh, flood-control zone, greenbelt and wildlife habitat. It is a place of tranquility in a growing urban clamor, with birds, mammals, fish and rare plants. Conservationists and lovers of the natural world know it as the most important geographical feature in central Sonoma County.

Unfortunately, over the years, the Laguna has been largely abused and ignored. It is no longer the clean-flowing waterway, boated by picnickers and used as the local swimming hole. No longer crammed with bass and perch for the catching, the Laguna has been channelized, filled, stripped of vegetation, dritted by dairy operations and sewage spills, and forgotten. Still the Laguna is a natural gem, literally in Sebastopol's front yard, and the value is so great that it must be

saved.

With increasing urbanization and explosive growth, public awareness of the Laguna is growing. The Laguna is important to the community for many reasons. It is a natural greenbelt for Sebastopol, protecting the city from Santa Rosa's urban sprawl. The flood-water retention mitigates Russian River flooding; its rich diversity makes it an excellent area for school children, as well as scientists to study; and it can be enjoyed by hikers and amateur naturalists. As important, it is close to many urban centers — a quiet counterpart to city living, and is accessible without a long drive.

The Laguna Advisory Committee, appointed by the Sebastopol City Council last January, presented its report on the Laguna to the Council on Jan. 19. The report is available for public review at the Sebastopol Library or may be purchased at City Hall. It emphasizes the importance of the Laguna in all its

natural functions, discusses both the damage and remaining rich diversity, prospects for rehabilitation and enhancement, and the possible sources for funding.

One recommendation calls for the City of Sebastopol to implement the natural resource element of the General Plan with a Laguna Linear Park. This would permanently recognize and protect the Laguna in the Sebastopol area. It could set an example, and lead the way to a larger regional planning effort, bringing together a range of interests to find ways to protect and improve the entire Laguna.

The Board of Directors of Sebastopol Tomorrow supports the efforts of the Laguna Advisory Committee and urges the City Council to continue the process towards Laguna protection and public education and invites citizens to become involved in this effort. For more information call the Sebastopol Tomorrow office at 823-7909.

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