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Laguna park advocates share visions

by Dan Collins

In anticipation of plans to create a city park surrounding the portion of the Laguna de Santa Rosa east of Sebastopol, the *Times & News* asked some of its proponents to share their vision of what sort of place it should be.

Sebastopol Mayor Anne Magnie envisions a public park centered in the portion of the Laguna which runs alongside Sebastopol, leaving much of the remainder untouched. The city park would serve as an accespoint to the area, allowing local citizens and visitors to enjoy the natural environment without causing more damage to the area than necessary.

"I think the public deserves some sort of access," she said. "If we can concentrate that access in the urban area, which is also a very rich ecosystem, then perhaps other areas can be preserved."

The city park, as Magnie sees it, would be "almost like a natural history park," featuring unobtrusive trails, self-guided nature walks, picnic tables and perhaps a bridge crossing the water.

"I wouldn't want to see real intrusive urban use of the area, like off-road vehicles," she said, adding that hot dog stands and snack bars such as those found at more urban parks would not fit in.

But Magnie is all for offering people the chance to experience the area by boat. She advocates including a canoe launch and said, "I'd love somebody to put in a boatworks."

Other city council members share Magnie's desire to make preservation of the area the top priority.

Councilman Nichols Stewart would like restoration of the area's natural characteristics to take precedence over development of the area for recreational use.

"My approach to this is as the restoration and preservation of a living ecosystem," said Nichols of the city's effort. "I don't see it being a park in hte sense of a recreational facility."

Stewart seeks a "low intensity development of the facility" with few trails and little else.

"You have to really control and direct access," he said, suggesting that most of the greater Laguna reserve, if acquired through legislation sponsored by Congressman Doug Bosco (D-Occidental), be left relatively untouched.

Perhaps one exception to that rule could be made, Stewart suggests, to allow construction of a trail the full length of the park. "It's exciting to think about a trail from here to the [Russian] River," he said, "but I think that's a long way off."

He advocates removal of invasive species which crowd out native plants, and recommnds "letting it revert to its natural growth pattern."

One of Stewart's key concerns is screening the restored Laguna habitat from development on Morris Street, the heart of the city's industrial development. This is currently being addressed through the city's revision of the wetlands ordinance, which restricts development of land possessing wetland characteristics.

Councilman Richard Johnson also supports minimizing the impact of human visitors to the area by keeping trails unpaved, limiting improvements and excluding overnight camping.

The most extensive improvement supported by Johnson is some sort of wooden platform overlooking the water.

But access should not be limited to the actual waterway, said Johnson. He thinks trails should extend out into the oak-studded meadows to the west.

Litter and the impact of human traffic on the native vegetation and wildlife remain concerns, however, and access must be engineered responsibly.

Said Johnson, "I'd hate like hell to provide access and find out years later that we've created an ecological disaster because people are trampling on the very wildflowers we'trying to preserve."

A key figure in the development of the revised wetlands ordinance was environmentalist Richard Nichols. Nichols agrees that trails are needed, but he feels that the emphasis should be on education rather than recreation.

He suggests creating a self-guided nature trail starting at the youth park on Morris Street on which families and school groups can explore the wetlands ecosystem.

Nichols is also open to the idea of a trail running the length of the reserve. "The type of people who'll walk a trail like that are the type who are sensitive to that kind of environment," he said.

But again, said Nichols, the first priority is protection of the area; development will come later.

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