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Council pleased with new wetlands zoning

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The Sebastopol City Council concluded a review of a proposed new ordinance designed to protect the city's wetlands, and pronounced themselves generally pleased with the measure.

By a 5-0 vote, they sent it on to the Planning Commission, which will hold the first in a series of public hearings on the changes, probably early next month.

"I'd feel perfectly fine adopting this as is," said Mayor Anne Maguire at one point during the council discussion. However, council adoption won't come until after the council has held it's own round of hearings, following the commission's study and recommendations.

The draft ordinance forwarded to the commission is the result of several months of intermittent discussion prompted by local environmentalist Richard Nichols' sugges-

tion that the city adopt some form of riparian protection mechanism. The Wetlands zoning changes were addressed first because of their application to the environmentally-sensitive Laguna de Santa Rosa. A stream protection ordinance is yet to be tackled.

Three kinds of wetlands

The revised Wetlands ordinance establishes a base W or "Primary Wetlands" district for "lands lying below the 100-year flood line which are in an open, natural state and which contain or could contain natural and native wetlands and related vegetation/habitat areas." Two related categories, WS ("Secondary Wetlands") and WF ("Fringe Wetlands") are also defined.

The WS classification applies to lands below the 100-year flood line "which are in a biologically altered state" but still have "a direct physical or functional relationship to a wetlands area and its ecosystem." WF lands are defined as those lying above the 100-year

floodline "which may have a direct or indirect influence on a wetlands and its ecosystem."

While the W zone stands alone, the WS and WF designations are designed to be combined with other base zones, such as residential agricultural or commercial. Only three large parcels at the edge of the Laguna are proposed for rezoning to W, while the revised combining districts would be substituted for the existing W-2 and W-3 categories now applied to most of the low-lying parcels along Sebastopol's eastern border.

Restrictions on development

The significance of the changes lies in the uses allowed on Wetlands zoned parcels. The pure W zone is the most restrictive, requiring a use permit for all uses. Permits may be obtained for such things as "open, passive recreational areas" or "open agriculture" (excluding buildings). Existing plant life is strictly protected by a clearly

stated requirement that vegetation "shall not be removed, degraded or damaged" unless prior approval is obtained. New residences are not allowed in the W zone.

WS lands also require a use permit for development, but the primary base district—residential, agricultural, commercial, etc.—controls the conditions set on those use permits. Lots with a WF overlay would be required to have a vernal pool/rare plant survey taken as a precondition of any development.