

Riggs pledges to revive 'dead' Laguna bill

12-19-90
ST & N

by Andrew Jowers

First District Congressman-elect Frank Riggs vowed Monday to continue efforts begun by his predecessor to provide permanent federal protection for the Laguna de Santa Rosa.

"I would really like to be a part of efforts to preserve this extraordinary resource," Riggs said, adding that citizen-led efforts to protect the laguna "deserve federal support."

Riggs said he hoped President

Bush will reiterate in his State of the Union address his concern for wetlands preservation, a "no net loss, no net fill" approach. That commitment, restated, would be a strong base from which to launch laguna protection efforts.

Speaking at a meeting of the newly incorporated Laguna de Santa Rosa Foundation Monday afternoon, Riggs told participants not to expect too much too soon, since much of his early time in Congress will be occupied

with the Persian Gulf crisis. Also, he said, he is not well enough versed in all issues affecting the 9,000-acre expanse of wetlands and dairy farms to support any specific laguna preservation plan.

"I need to learn more," he said, particularly about how protection measures will impact property owners in the area.

Indeed, property rights were a sticking point in a recent effort to form a 9,000-acre preserve. A

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bill by Rep. Doug Bosco, D-Sebastopol, who lost his seat to Riggs in the Nov. 6 election, would have created a federal Wildlife Preserve managed by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service and the state Department of Fish and Game; the measure was approved by the House, but Congress adjourned before it was considered by the Senate.

"We're back to square one," said Robert Sharp, Laguna foundation board member.

The bill, now as dead as Bosco's re-election hopes, at first stated that land for the preserve would only be bought from willing sellers. But the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, fearful of setting such a precedent, insisted that eminent domain provisions be included in the bill, much to the dismay of laguna property owners.

Laguna Foundation members said they oppose forcing property owners to sell their land in order to form a preserve, but do support the use of federal money to buy land at fair market value.

If Riggs, who takes office Jan. 3, had any doubts about local concern over preserving the laguna, they were put to rest by the newly incorporated laguna foundation.

At the meeting, called specifically to inform the Windsor Republican about their intentions, the 14-member foundation board outlined the environ-

mental and social value of the laguna.

Noting that the laguna lies in the Pacific flyway for migrating birds, is home to a variety of animal species, including 230 types of birds, and more than 280 plant species, several threatened or endangered, foundation members said what they have been saying since the first laguna advisory committee met about four years ago: that the laguna, though already greatly harmed by man, is one of the largest and one of the few remaining fresh-water marsh systems in the state, and so deserves federal protection.

Indeed, Riggs was just another in a long line of government officials addressed by foundation members. They have lobbied and educated for years, including testifying before Congressional committees on the laguna's importance.

Sebastopol, a leader in laguna preservation efforts, in the mid-80s invited members of the public to form a laguna advisory committee. After meeting for a year, the group issued a report detailing what the city could do to preserve the laguna; recommendations included establishing a laguna park, which the city is doing.

The committee continued to meet, but broadened its membership to include representatives from Santa Rosa, the wastewater treatment facility on Llano Road, and state and county agencies.

The committee, which hosted the educational State of Lagu-

na Conference in Sebastopol in 1988 attended by 200 people, incorporated in October as a non-profit foundation, the better to deal with funds, apply for grants from government agencies and initiate proposals, said Kim Cordell, foundation executive director. Cordell, a Sebastopol hydrologist, is the foundation's only paid staff member.

The foundation's goals are to collect and disseminate information about the laguna, to provide a forum for divergent views, to educate the public, to provide technical information as requested by governmental agencies, to encourage adoption and enforcement of a laguna management plan, and to ensure the laguna's "long-term health and diversity," said Cordell.

Now composed of concerned citizens, property owners and people with technical expertise, the board consists of Nichols Stewart, Sebastopol City Councilman; John Cummings, ecologist; George Snyder, county Fish and Wildlife commissioner; Richard Nichols, laguna resident; Robert Sharp, wildlife biologist; Suzanne Nelson, laguna resident; Jennifer Joell, farmer; Miles Ferris, Santa Rosa public utilities department; Robert Muelrath, laguna farmer; Steve French, landscape architect; Anne Maganie, board chair and Sebastopol City Council member; William Haigwood, realtor; Bob Beretta, laguna farmer; and Frank Kasimov, Santa Rosa land-use planner.