

THE CITIZENS' PERSPECTIVE

## SEBASTOPOL

## Speculators Return to Destroy Laguna Uplands

by Terri Short

Although its original, wild reaches have been severely curtailed by urban sprawl, the Laguna de Santa Rosa remains a stand-out among California's rare freshwater wetlands. Lucky is Sebastopol to be perched on the western banks of this inland ecosystem which is rich in hundreds of species of herbaceous and flowering plants, insects, birds, and small mammals — some of which are threatened and endangered species.

Seemingly oblivious to this backyard natural resource, local speculators are trying to smother a stretch of western Laguna uplands beneath a subdivision development.

The newest proposed development covers approximately 7.5 acres of the Laguna de Santa Rosa upland area. While there are new names and money, the proposal is not new to thousands of residents who greatly value the Laguna ecosystem. A petition with over 1,000 signatures

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**Rosa is to be more than mere lip service.**

several years ago to profit from a massive development, the Laguna is apparently little more than a grand opportunity to cash in on.

When the Sebastopol Planning Commission resoundingly defeated the last development proposal in May 1990 (6 to 1 against), some Laguna lovers believed this quick-cash gang had gone away for good. No such luck. The current plan appears to be of the old "red herring" strategy. It works like this: Take the original project proposal (Palm Terrace), add a big, new subdivision proposal (Saddlebutt), knowing this double-threat will

never fly, which it didn't. Next, drop the second "red-herring" proposal, thereby fooling the public and decision-makers into thinking the speculators are being reasonable and are filled with the spirit of compromise. Sharp-eyed Sebastopolians will not fall for this. The development, as proposed, poses the same threat to the Laguna uplands: EXTINCTION.

In testimony during planning commission hearings (for the previous proposal), the developer's paid consultant said the uplands could be destroyed with little consequence. This flies in the face of scientific knowledge of the complex mechanisms by which ecosystems sustain themselves. (See April issue of the S.C.E.I.R.) In the case of the Laguna ecosystem, as in most others, the viability of the various plant and animal communities is dependent upon the maintenance of vital links between trophic or food levels. Grasslands associated with the lower, riparian habitats of the Laguna ecosystem furnish nutrients for insects and ground-dwelling rodents and small mammals, which in turn, supply nutrition for raptors, song birds, and intermediate-sized mammals. Additionally, the uplands-grassland complex provides a crucial nesting and foraging ground for wildlife during seasonal flooding stages. (If the Laguna is ever returned to its year-round standing water status, the uplands will assume even more importance.) The uplands, which would be utterly destroyed by this project, are a key component of the functionality of the Laguna ecosystem. That is why so many of us have fought so hard to preserve this gently sloping "intertidal" habitat which spreads its beauty and bounty to the very backyards of existing Sebastopol.

In addition to the critical ecological concerns, there is a compelling argument to be made for preservation of the uplands based on the well-known prehistoric village site located there. Almost all of this village, which occupied some of the same area as present-day Sebastopol, has been destroyed or covered by development. Only a tiny portion, directly on the site of this proposed development, remains. (For more information on this village, see July S.C.E.I.R.)

We human members of the greater Laguna ecosystem must again take the lead, where Santa Rosa and other area communities have not, in the effort to preserve one of California's last, remaining freshwater wetlands ecosystems. Such commitment is never easy. The forces and motives of speculators/developers are formidable, even when they wear a local face.

In my recent travels across the western United States, I saw widespread evidence of communities which have led the good fight to preserve their local natural resources: In Kanab, Utah, the brushy rim above rugged red rock cliffs has been forever preserved for hiking and nesting raptors — an area that was once slated for development into pricey homesites; in Prescott, Arizona, the city set aside a geological landmark — Thumb Butte — as a forest sanctuary for resident wildlife and humans, all within the city's sphere of influence; and in Green River, Wyoming, people have committed themselves to establishment of a riverine greenbelt zone along their namesake river.

And it is, indeed, to our Laguna de Santa Rosa — that we must turn our attention, commitment, and stewardship. Sebastopol must decide if its long-stated love for the Laguna de Santa Rosa is to be more than mere lip service. We are not talking about an isolated, urban-bound parcel. The speculator would wipe out an integral portion of the rare and fragile Laguna ecosystem. This development would put houses and pavement between the existing City and the Laguna. It would forever deprive future

Upland area where development is proposed. Laguna Riparian area in background.

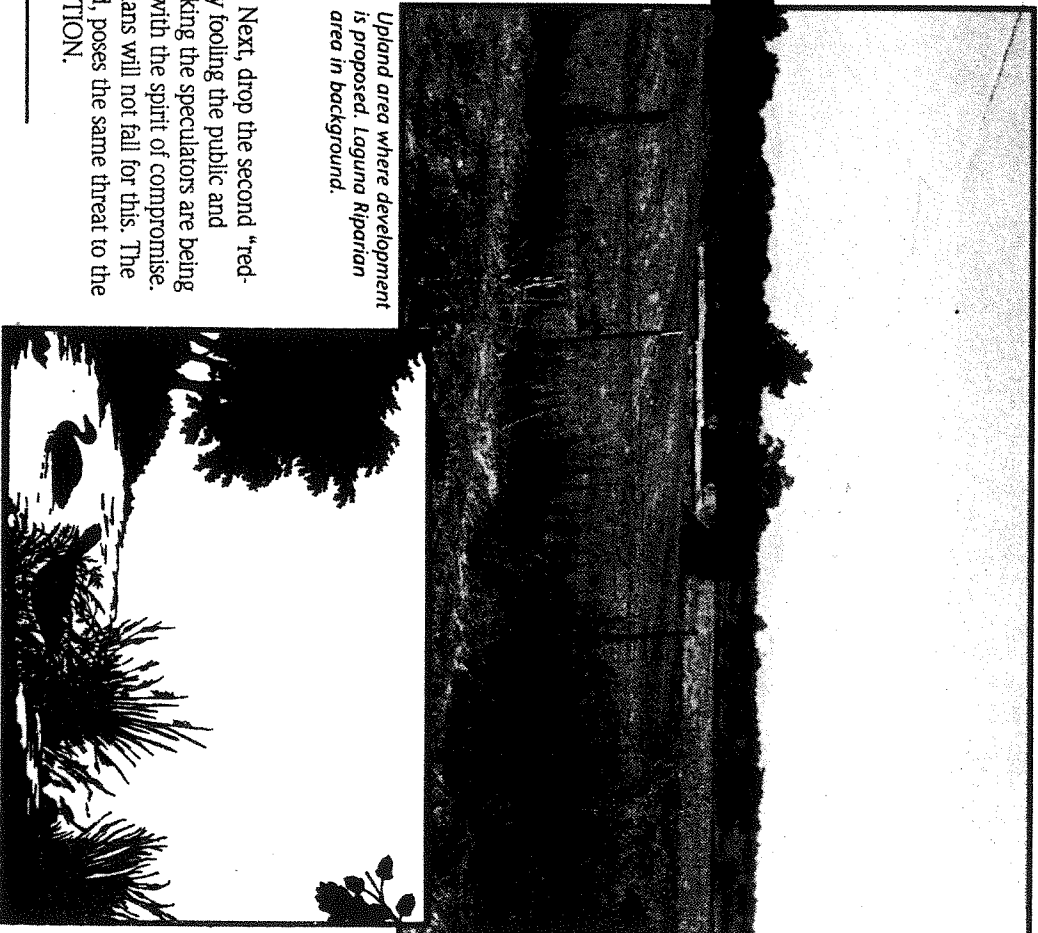


Illustration by Jeri Lynn Bouguereau

generations of the quiet views and rich, upland habitats which evolved with the watery lowlands below.

The Laguna de Santa Rosa and its western uplands is the single natural heritage site by which Sebastopol can honestly proclaim its uniqueness. The decision has to be made. Will this City favor a few speculators who want to turn a short-term investment into quick profits? Or, will Sebastopol join the increasing number of cities across the nation and declare its intention to preserve its unique natural resources forever, defining Sebastopol as a place on the Earth where all life is highly valued?

If the latter course is to be followed, this community must say no to this project and yes to preservation of the Laguna uplands. I challenge my fellow citizens to heed the words of the great farmer-poet Wendell Berry who said this about community value:

"The local community is...by definition, placed, [and] its success cannot be divided from the success of its place, its natural setting and surroundings..the two economies, the natural and the human, support each other; each is the other's hope of a durable and liveable life."

*Terri and his wife, Eve, have lived in Sebastopol for 9 years. He is a graduate from Sonoma State University in Inter-disciplinary studies.*

The developer just postponed an August 25th preliminary review of the proposal with the planning commission. No future meeting has been scheduled. Call Sebastopol Tomorrow to find out how to get involved: Kathy Cettinger 823-9807.

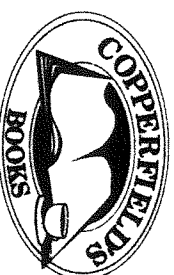
### Sebastopol Development Activities

See past issues for details

1. 48 housing units. Gardener project. Gravenstein Hwy. North. Negotiating need for supplemental EIR.
2. 80 rental units. West of Village Park, adjacent to Laguna de Santa Rosa. Applicant reduced units to 78. Planning Commission didn't accept preliminary project.
3. 6 lot subdivision. Bell P.U.D. Still pending.
4. 8 mixed housing units. Stevens P.U.D. Still pending.
5. 22 housing units. Approximately 7.5 acres. Palm Terrace. Adjacent to Laguna de Santa Rosa. New investor, Hugh Futrell (Santa Rosa Housing Authority Board member) has joined developers in developing this property. Original 70+ units have been decreased to 22 units. Portion of land to be annexed in the last proposal has been deleted from proposal. Preliminary review Planning Commission was to be on August 25. Has been postponed.
6. 120 mixed housing units. Canada Vista. Adjacent to Ascadero Creek. Annexation. No application submitted.
7. 3-lot subdivision. 269 Virginia Ave. Scheduled for September 22nd Planning Commission meeting.

### New Activities

8. 3 lot subdivision. Brookside. Still in preliminary environmental review.



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