

Guest speaker Councilman explains vote

by Howard Levy

On Feb. 16, I made a difficult decision regarding the annexation of an eight-acre parcel for the proposed 48-unit Orchard Park subdivision.

There are many good things about the Orchard Park subdivision plan including the 27 low-to-moderate priced housing units, pedestrian/bike pathway, small park, rear alley accessible garages, proximity to Redwood Marketplace shopping center and Craftsman style units, to name a few.

I voted against the project, along with three other council members, to form a 4-1 majority against annexation. But each of us spent many weeks of internal struggle trying to weigh the above benefits with the costs to the City as a whole.

Before I discuss the important issues of concern, I would like to straighten out two misconceptions:

Sebastopol has never been a "housing free zone." Our population grew at over 2 percent per year during the 1980s and just slightly less than that from 1990 to 1992. Orchard Park is the first major subdivision formally rejected by a City Council in many years.

Sebastopol has never been an "elitist" community. Our median household income ranks below Santa Rosa, Petaluma, Cloverdale, Sonoma, Windsor and that bastion of snobbery, Cotati. Our median priced house is only slightly higher than other County cities when country homes outside the city limits are excluded from the calculations. Sebastopol has done a better job of providing affordable housing than almost any other city in Sonoma County.

What are the costs of growth?"

But the most important issue is that we as a community must first determine how fast we want to grow, where we want to grow, what the costs of growth are and how to provide adequate services for our residents. This is especially important when an annexation of this size is proposed.

Let's take the questions one at a time:

How fast do we want to grow? In the January 1992 General Plan Survey over 60 percent of the residents were in favor of slower growth and an even greater majority were against all annexations. Residents want less than the 40 units per year produced at the 2 percent growth rate of the 1980s and they want open space retained.

Where do we want to grow? We have a limited sewer capacity. We have enough to provide for subdivision of vacant lands within the city limits and only some of that outside our boundaries. If we annex to the north now, will we then be unable to annex lands to the south where job producing industries may go? More commercial and industrial development will provide more tax revenue to fund services for current and future residents.

What are the costs of growth? Many planners say that it costs a city more to provide services to new residential development than that development brings into the city in taxes and fees. We need to

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weigh those costs in making decisions for all housing, even affordable housing.

Can we provide adequate services?

There are over \$2,000,000 in sewer improvements scheduled for the next four years, but we have only \$340,000 in our sewer fund.

We are attempting to drill for a new well that will cost about \$400,000, yet we have only \$100,000 in our water fund.

The elementary schools are at record enrollments and would be hard pressed to find room even for portable classrooms.

The State is threatening to cut our 1993/4 budget even more than last year.

The answers to these four questions will be provided by the General Plan which should be completed in nine months. Many public hearings will be held, providing the opportunity for your input.

It is my hope that upon completion of the General Plan we will be better able to encourage production of affordable housing within the guidelines of good solid planning goals and policies. The horse should always come before the cart.

(Howard Levy is a member of the Sebastopol City Council.)