

Commission rejects Palm Terrace subdivision plans

by Marsha Trent

On a 4-3 vote, the Sebastopol Planning Commission last week turned thumbs down to a 25 home subdivision proposal on a 7.2 acre parcel behind Palm Drive Hospital, saying the project lacked enough affordable housing and would obscure the public's view of the Laguna de Santa Rosa.

Developers of the controversial Palm Terrace residential subdivision are tentatively set to bring their plan to the City Council on March 15.

Their plan calls for 19 single family homes and six rental "granny" units on a site at the end of Palm Ave. behind Palm Drive Hospital.

Despite the promise of a 1.8 acre park dedication along the laguna that would include a pedestrian path, planning commissioners Helen Shane, Linda Maurer, Rocky Thompson and Barry Chertov decided that any benefit of the proposed project could not override the potential "visual" impact on the Laguna.

Commissioners David Leff, Katherine Austin and Marsha Sue Lustig generally favored the project, but agreed the Palm Terrace plan is flawed and would require some redesign to get their whole-hearted

approval.

After hearing objections to the project from about 15 local residents, the commission was only obligated to make a recommendation to the council based on whether the project's impact on the Laguna, set forth in the Environmental Impact Report (EIR), could be mitigated by planning and design. If an impact could not be mitigated, the commission had to find there were benefits to the city in the project that would override any impacts on the laguna.

While most people who spoke at the hearing expressed concern about any development adjacent to the Laguna, the commissioners' discussion centered on the visual impact of the project and on the affordability of the housing.

People should realize "that if the city didn't want to develop this parcel at all—that should have been taken care of somewhere along the way," Lustig said, noting that the parcel is designated in the general plan for medium to high density residential development.

If appears some form of residential development is within the right of the owner, Lustig said, but some changes in the current project design would be

necessary for "me to feel comfortable," about recommending it.

Leff said many of the proposals within the project—including the plan for a pedestrian and bicycle path hooking into the Rodota Trail, the potential for marsh restoration, and the possibility of an innovative storm drainage system—could not overcome the "lack of (a) real firm feature of affordability in this project."

By not going along with the redesign recommendation of City Planner Richard Spittler that the rental "granny" units intended as "low to moderate income housing" be converted to

ownership properties, Leff said, there was nothing in the plan to "lock in permanently or guarantee the affordability of the units."

Shane cited concerns seconded

by the other commissioners when she stated that "the benefit to Sebastopol" would not be "enough" to override the loss of 5.3 acres of upland habitat. She also expressed doubt that single

family houses with a Laguna view would be affordably priced under \$300,000 and was concerned over the impact of the project on the public's access to Laguna views.

Charges dropped in exposure case

The Sonoma County District Attorney's office has decided not to prosecute a private security guard arrested in Sebastopol last December for allegedly exposing himself to two girls in outside the Sebastopol Veterans Memorial Building.

Ned Andrew Betts, 21, an ESP & Alarms, Inc. employee, has

been reinstated on the job. He was suspended pending the outcome of the allegations after two girls, ages 12 and 13, told police he had exposed himself to them while they were walking a dog near the building where a Palm Drive Hospital Christmas party was getting underway.

Prosecutors said charges were not filed because the two girls who complained to police were reluctant to testify. A Palm Drive Hospital employee who claimed to have witnessed the incident stated that Betts "opened his belt and tucked in his shirt," but did not expose himself to the youngsters.