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Sebastopol rejects Laguna development

Even more decisively than the Planning Commission had a month earlier, the Sebastopol City Council flatly turned down a developer's bid to build a 17-home subdivision at the edge of the Laguna de Santa Rosa. The vote on the long-debated Palm Terrace project was 4-1, with only Councilman Ken Foley offering any support for the development, which has been pending before the city, in several permutations, for most of the past eight years.

While Councilman Howard Levy offered a series of suggestions as to the kind of changes necessary for him to support a subdivision on the seven-acre site located just over the crest of a hill behind Palm Drive Hospital, he was the only one to do so. Both Mayor Anne Magnie and Councilwoman Lynn Hamilton indicated they would prefer that a maximum of four homes be built on the property, based on the number of lots believed to be already drawn there and the expected density to be shown for the land in the new Sebastopol General Plan, which is currently being revised.

The developer's representative, Charles Evans, however, expressed frustration that the council's stance was at odds with the classifications the property currently has under the existing General Plan, which remains in effect until the updated version is formally adopted. "No project that is consistent with the General Plan is acceptable to the council," he objected.

Earlier in the evening, Evans offered an alter-

nate version of the project, which had been criticized in detail by the Sebastopol Planning Commission in February, when they voted 4-3 to recommend denial of the development application. Neither option was discussed in any detail, nor did the council, with the exception of Levy, appear interested in exploring revisions along those lines.

The three-and-a-half-hour meeting featured a public hearing in which all but two speakers lobbied against the construction of any project on the site, which was praised as one of the few remaining large parcels on uplands habitat for Laguna wildlife. Several people expressed a desire to see the land purchased for public open space, but the council did not embrace that notion, presumably because the city has no resources available to do so anytime soon.

The 4-1 vote ensured that the land will remain vacant for some time longer, but also increased the likelihood that the matter will next be argued before a judge. As he had before the Planning Commission, Evans took pains to make certain that his arguments were "on the record," apparently anticipating that legal recourse might follow a council rejection of the development application.

Sebastopol is already embroiled in a convoluted lawsuit involving the council's decision not to approve another proposed subdivision at the north end of town. That project, proposed by Santa Rosa builder Richard Gardner, would have included a substantial affordable-housing component, but also required annexation, something that Palm Terrace did not. The trial over Gardner's Orchard Estates project is now scheduled to be heard in April, and the outcome may well determine whether or not Sebastopol goes back to court over Palm Terrace.

—Bruce Robinson