

Applesauce

# Settlements

*Past and present collide in Sebastopol*

IT WAS SAD, probably futile, but definitely not meaningless. The last gasp in the seemingly interminable debate over the development of the ancient Indian lands now known as Palm Terrace, overlooking the Laguna de Santa Rosa at the eastern edge of Sebastopol, will be played out later this month.

But the handwriting on the soon-to-be-built walls is already clearly visible.

This is a project whose inevitability was conceded a decade ago when an ill-advised townhouse project of more than 60 units won council approval, on the very same site. And before that, those with long memories may recall, Sebastopol's General Plan called for the nefarious Route E bypass to divert massive amounts of municipal traffic around downtown via a raised roadway skirting the Laguna's edge.

Well, Route E was scratched, leaving the way open for development plans, and a succession of them have paraded across the site, becoming gradually smaller and more sensitive with each iteration.

Not of their own volition, of course. After that first horrid project won approval (and died on the vine thanks to a downturn in the economy that left the would-be builders unable to secure funds to proceed before their permits expired), there arose within the Sebastopol community a vocal segment determined to defend the Laguna, and the lands that we now know as Palm Terrace became part of that determination.

Over time, different arguments have been employed to achieve the constant goal of keeping the land open. Development proposals have been attacked for being too dense, compounding already bad traffic conditions nearby; for damaging the Laguna's upland ecosystem; and, most recently, for running roughshod over the long and significant Native American presence on those contested acres.

This was the prevailing theme as the Sebastopol City Council heard nearly two hours of "public input" on the latest version of the project Tuesday evening. "Long before Columbus, this was home to the Indian. No matter where you develop, our people were there. Sometimes you forget that," said Pomo elder Grant Smith. His recollections of a tribal burial ground in the Palm Terrace vicinity had earlier prompted an unusual archaeological search of the property, which

used bulldozers and backhoes to determine there were no gravesites on the scene.

However, a previously unknown campsite with artifact fragments 500 to 1,000 years old was discovered where two new homes are slated to be built.

Jeff Ellifort, a neighbor who has extensively researched the area's history, eloquently pictured the vast encampments that once filled the entire length of what is now Sebastopol, while Joanne Campbell gave personal detail to the past 100 years, recounting the outlines of the lives of her grandmother and her father on the lands still known to the Pomo as the "Walker Ranch."

But for all of the emotional vibrancy of this testimony, none of it appears likely to affect the ultimate outcome, which is stipulated in dreary detail in the 23-page legal document that has halted the developers' \$2 million lawsuit against the city for denying their project in early 1994. The settlement demands that the city approve two phases of a scaled-down project (12 and six units, respectively), lest the suit be revived, and insists Sebastopol is still legally obligated to approve the earlier 25-unit proposal.

However, the compromise also gives the city some significant concessions. Not only is the density greatly reduced, but the amount of land set aside for permanent open space has been expanded (and will tie in nicely with the pending public acquisition of the adjacent Saddleburr property, assuming that can be consummated), and the access road is back at the rear of the property, as far from the Laguna as possible.

On Tuesday night, a divided council voted 3-2 to accept the settlement; it is widely expected that they will approve the project by the same margin when it comes back before them Sept. 17. All of which made this week's session—which specifically was not a "public hearing" and therefore not part of the official record regarding the Palm Terrace site—seem irrelevant to the final disposition of the land.

In the absence of any burial sites, Grant Smith was willing to let matters rest, at least for this parcel. But he served notice that the issue will not go away. "If there are any other properties around here that are going to be developed, and we find there are burial grounds there," he concluded, "we are going to have another discussion."

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