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Shaky Ground

Laguna Uplands saved from bulldozer. What's next?

THROUGHOUT the months-long, controversy-laden, grassroots effort to raise \$1.3 million to buy Sebastopol's Laguna Uplands area—site of a historic Pomo settlement and slated for 18 luxury homes—from its would-be developers, the essential questions concerned whether such a thing was even possible.

When a group of local Native Americans, to everyone's surprise, came forward to protest the plan and to demand more input into the decision-making process, the question became, "What in the world will happen next?"

Last week, escrow closed on the culturally and ecologically sensitive 8.5-acre property, and LandWrights—the land trust organization that has been working with the Laguna Uplands Project—received the title to the land, preventing the high-priced housing subdivision (the infamous Palm Terrace) that was once considered inevitable.

But the future of the land remains uncertain.

"We honestly don't know," laughs LandWrights spokesperson Joan Vilms when asked about future plans for the property. "Until now, all of our efforts have been on acquisition. During that whole process, we never knew from day to day if it was falling apart or coming together. Planning ahead wasn't really our job."

An "Open Land" celebration is likely for later this summer, she suggests. Beyond that, Vilms expresses a desire to catch her breath and get her bearings before galloping forward on anything major. "We're improvising," she adds. "But we now know the land is saved."

One thing that won't happen, Vilms says, is the construction of a Native American cultural center, a controversial suggestion made months ago and opposed by local Pomos. That proposal nearly scuttled the whole project when local environmentalist Ann Maurice, chairperson for the Native American Land Committee of Ya-Ka-Ma, launched a pre-emptive move intended, according to Maurice, to assure that the land would be left in its natural state. Proponents of the Laguna Project say it was much ado about nothing.

"There never was any intention of building a center on the site," Vilms strongly affirms. "The idea came up, but the emphasis on it was completely distorted. We have no

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Land Where the Eleberries Grow: Pomo elder Grant Smith gazes out over the Laguna Uplands in Sebastopol.

plans for anything like that."

But that's not good enough for Maurice, who threatens legal action if a Native American cultural center is proposed. "We want them to put that in writing," she says. "They have, as part of the [conservation] easement, retained a development right to construct buildings, parking lots, and other structures, and there's no guarantee that they will not exercise that option. If they do exercise such an option, we want guarantees that they will do appropriate environmental impact studies.

"This is our first key concern."

The other concern—that Native Americans be a prominent voice in the future management of the land—appears to be of equal importance to the new owners.

"We are looking for the positive voices in the community," Vilms explains. "Including, obviously, the Native American community to whom this land is meaningful. Our concept is for native people and non-native people to work together on this as partners, for there really to be that coming together.

"That's the vision we want to work toward."

MEANWHILE, fundraising will continue to be an important element, Vilms says. The Laguna Uplands Project has paid Palm Terrace owner Jim Ghilotti a little over \$1 million so far, a large part of which was derived from a \$900,000 contribution from the Sonoma County Open Space District. In a generous agreement

with the local developer, \$35,000 is due within two months and the remaining \$300,000 must be paid over the next three years; at \$1,350,000, the purchase price is a substantial reduction from the original \$1.5 million. The fundraising will now veer from the state-of-emergency style, bake-sale, and penny-jar approach that has characterized the effort to focus on larger private and corporate donations.

As to how the property will be managed, Vilms can only speculate. "What I hope happens now is that a stewardship committee is assembled to deal with things as they come up," she offers. "We'll be assembling a team of restoration biologists and Native American people to begin looking at what would be appropriate and how the property should be restored.

"We also would expect, now that the land is protected, that the city will implement the Laguna Trail." City officials have held that the property is key to the construction of the long-planned Laguna Trail, which would lead from the Laguna Uplands to the Laguna de Santa Rosa at the eastern edge of Sebastopol. "One of our focuses," Vilms continues, "will be for the community to make sure that the trail happens."

As for the day-to-day management of the land, Vilms says no one is in any hurry to act. "The land has been sitting there for 15 years with no management," she concludes. "It's a pasture. It grows grass. Nature is managing the land. That's how we want it to continue to be."

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