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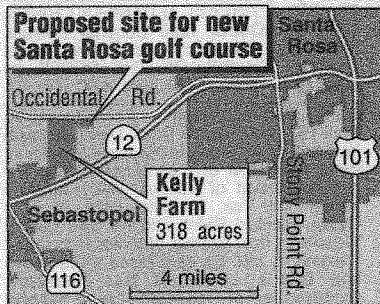
SR LAGUNA

Critics invited to golf course inquiry

By MIKE McCOY
Staff Writer

Santa Rosa's campaign to build a controversial golf course on Sebastopol's doorstep and adjacent to the wildlife-rich Laguna de Santa Rosa begins next week when it invites the project's harshest critics to join the effort.

"We don't want to start spending hundreds of thousands of dollars only to find out in two years it won't work" said Santa Rosa Mayor Sharon Wright, alluding to the



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money it would take to design and study the impacts the course would have on the laguna.

Wright and Councilman Dave Berto, the two members of the council's golf course subcommittee, agreed last week to appoint a 10-member committee to determine if a golf course can prove compatible alongside the 13-mile-long waterway and the adjoining 20,000-acre flood plain that stretches from Rohnert Park to Forestville.

The committee will include members of the proposed course's two most formidable obstacles, Sebastopol's City Council and the Laguna de Santa Rosa Foundation, a 14-year-old conservation group dedicated to preserving the waterway's natural habitat. The first meeting is tentatively set for 7 p.m. April 27 at City Hall.

The city wants to develop an 18-hole course on Kelly Farm, a 318-acre island of land purchased and annexed by Santa Rosa in the 1970s as part of its wastewater disposal program.

The farm, which sits next to Sebastopol's easterly city bound-

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ary, also sits next to the meandering laguna, home to hundreds of species of plants and birds. It was twice proposed to Congress for national wildlife refuge status in the 1980s without success.

A report commissioned by Santa Rosa in 1996 concluded Kelly Farm has enough land to build a full-sized, 180-acre golf course while still providing a large enough buffer to protect the laguna and wetlands from its impacts.

But skeptics contend flying golf balls, herbicides and pesticides will escape the course's boundary and wreak havoc with the 300 species of plants and more than 200 types of birds the laguna supports.

"We're not trying to make a national park out of it (laguna) but if people realize its importance to the ecology of the region, there'd be a less of an effort to develop it," laguna foundation member Bill

Haigwood said when Santa Rosa began seriously floating the idea months ago.

Despite those potential obstacles, Wright and Berto said the city should go ahead with efforts to determine if a golf course might be feasible after a meeting with Sebastopol's council last week found a majority willing to consider the idea.

"There is a willingness to hear the pros and cons," said City Manager Ken Blackman, who suggested the city would be better off building a consensus first rather than immediately moving ahead with design plans.

"That (slower) kind of approach comes with that site. In the absence of doing it that way, you'd be into head-butting," he said.

Should the course actually go forward, Santa Rosa Recreation and Park Director Chuck Rust estimated it will cost \$7 million to \$8 million to build, an expense that would be repaid from profits generated by Santa Rosa's Bennett Valley Golf Course, the most heavily played course in Sonoma County.