

# Tarweed raises ugly head again

Some new patches of Watsonville's "rare and endangered" species of tarweed have been discovered in the city.

The patches are located on a site targeted for a large development by Lester, Roach and Gardiner realtors. The site, as planned, would consist of a residential-commercial complex, including 130 to 150 townhouse apartments, two restaurants, a 200-room motel with restaurant and banquet facilities, and 18,000 square feet of retail commercial space. The proposed development is known as Apple Hill, and would be built near the freeway north of the Green Valley Road extension.

Watsonville's tarweed gained national attention last year when environmentalists sought to delay a multi-million dollar housing project behind the Starlite Drive-In off Pennsylvania Drive. The environmentalists contended that the project would destroy the weed, which they said is almost extinct and now grows in only several spots in the world — mostly all in Santa Cruz and Monterey counties.

City council members and planning commissioners, however, were clearly unimpressed. But they gave permission to botanists to gather tarweed seeds for transplanting. However, the botanists never bothered to transplant the seeds, and grading work on the new housing subdivision has recently begun, apparently eradicating the weed from the site forever.

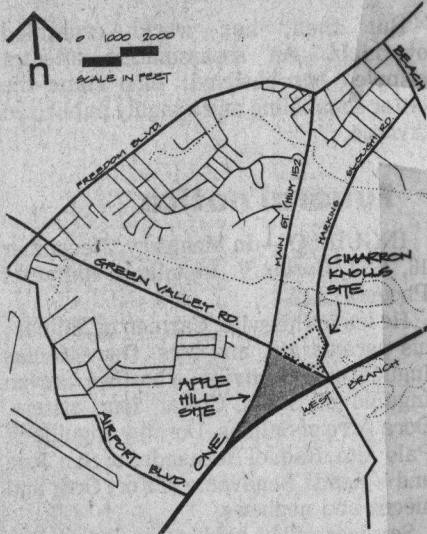
According to an environmental impact report prepared for the Apple Hill project, two patches of tarweed would be destroyed by the project as now planned. The private consultant who wrote the EIR, Kate Burdick of Aptos, recommends that the site plan be modified to let the tarweed grow in peace. The city Planning Department, in a memo to city planning commissioners, agrees that the site plan should be changed.

The EIR points out that the Santa Cruz tarweed is on the official California Native Plant Society endangered plant species list, and is "scheduled for inclusion" in the National Register of Endangered Plants now being compiled. Santa Cruz County locations of the plant include the fairgrounds and Graham Hill Showgrounds.

The report says it has been assumed that the Santa Cruz Tarweed likes sandy soil best. Yet, the report adds, "the specimens found on the Apple Hill site are growing well in association with various grasses on a soil with high clay content."

The weed, according to the report, is considered "fairly hardy" since it's able to withstand annual soil discing.

During the tarweed discussions last year, an American Indian supported the right of the tarweed to survive, saying that the weed was once used by his ancestors to cure bronchial disorders and flu.



Map shows development

City planning commissioners will consider the EIR at their meeting next Tuesday night. In addition to the tarweed issue, the EIR makes these points:

- The project would be built in a scenic highway corridor, probably diminishing the beauty of the area.

- Residents of the townhouse would experience noise pollution because of freeway traffic.

- The project would generate increased overcrowding in local schools.

- Storm water from the project might harm the nearby slough areas.

But the report also lists potential benefits of the project. These include:

- The provision of middle-to-high-income housing in an area now experiencing a housing shortage.

- The creation of construction jobs, as well as long-term jobs.

- Increasing the number of motel rooms in an area that needs them.

The report also notes that the Santa Cruz long-toed salamander might live in the project area. But there is no proof of this.

The salamander has also been an environmental nemesis of local developers, adding to the cost of housing projects in the Midcounty area.

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