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Rare weed stands in way of new homes

By KEN MCLAUGHLIN

First, it was the Santa Cruz long-toed salamander.

Now it's a rare species of tarweed.

The city council last night was confronted by a group of environmentalists who feared that approval of a housing subdivision near Arthur Road and Hammer Drive could endanger the weed.

According to Rexford Palmer, a UC Davis graduate student, the project site has the distinction of being one of the five places in Santa Cruz County — and the world — where the tarweed *Holocarpha Macradenia* grows. Both the state and federal government, he said, having identified the plant as a "rare and endangered species."

Two of the other five locations are at the Santa Cruz County fairgrounds on East Lake Ave.

Most city council members, however, were clearly unimpressed with the weed. Councilman Charles Palmtag asked

Palmer: "What makes this weed so special that it should be preserved?"

He noted that farmers in the Central Valley had "spent years" trying to get rid of their pesty tarweed.

Palmer said, however, that the species of tarweed here is "not really a pest." He said, however, it was an "ancestor" to the Central Valley Tarweed.

Asked what economic value it had, Palmer conceded that it had none, "the same as 99 per cent of all plants and animals on the earth."

Also appearing at the meeting to defend the tarweed was Dave Bockman of the Sierra Club.

Bockman pointed out that the planning commission had approved a tentative map for the housing project without reviewing the final environmental impact report. He said that was an improper procedure under state environmental guidelines.

City Attorney Don Haile said that Bockman was correct, and the council

subsequently referred the matter back to the commission.

The proposed project is located off Hammer Drive above the drive-in theatre. Twenty-one fourplexes would be built on 8.9 acres.

Bockman also pointed out that the commission had approved the project over the objections of the school district, which is worried about more overcrowding at Hyde School.

At that point, Councilman Frank Osmer asked Bockman why the Sierra Club was concerned itself with overcrowded schools.

"Or is this just a handy argument?" asked Osmer.

Bockman said the Sierra Club is concerned with "all aspects of environmental impacts."

The environmental impact report had also suggested as one possible "mitigation measure" that one lot be set aside as the "remnant habitat" for the tarweed. One

idea is to build a fence around the remaining tarweed to protect it.

Mayor Bill Johnston wanted to know "who would pay" for the acquisition of the land and "this fencing."

Bockman suggested that perhaps the state fish and game commission would be interested in acquiring the site was a tarweed reserve.

An idea for transplanting the tarweed to the fairgrounds (to grow with the other tarweed) was dismissed by Palmer as ecologically unsound. "It could be a disaster for the plants at the fairground," he said.

Palmer explained that even though the tarweed is of the same species, the weed varies slightly in each "eco-site." The weeds, he said, might not mix well.

Oh yes...the salamander. Santa Cruz county is the home of a rare type of beast called the long-toed salamander. It breeds in Rio del Mar, and its presence there has limited home building near its habitat.