

# Developer puts out welcome mat for salamanders

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A packed auditorium in Aptos last night heard developers of the Seascapes Uplands describe their plan to include an ecological preserve in the project.

If any Santa Cruz long-toed salamanders were listening, they probably scuttled off to tell friends and family throughout the county to pack their things and come on down.

The humans in the audience, however, weren't as impressed.

More than 100 people turned out at Rio del Mar School to express their views at the invitation of the Holcomb Corp., which needs a permit to proceed with its development of upscale homes on a 190-acre parcel known as the Seascapes Uplands — bounded by Bonita Drive, San Andreas Road, Seascapes Boulevard and Dolphin Drive.

The open property is covered with evergreen forest, coastal vegetation and riparian woodland. At least one rare and 18 locally unique plant species grow there, and a healthy population of the endangered long-toed salamander calls it home.

A project calling for 551 homes was first proposed in 1978 but was sent back to the developers by county planners. The issues of increased traffic, noise and environmental hazards had to be further addressed, as did considerable public concern over degradation of the salamander's natural habitat.

Since then, the plans have been reviewed, rehashed, reworked and resubmitted four times, each subsequent proposal altering the balance of houses and open space. Public hearings will be held when county planners complete their review.

As outlined in the latest draft envi-

ronmental impact report, completed in September, the developers now propose to build 142 single-family houses on 43.8 acres. Streets would cover 13.5 acres, and a 7.2-acre area has been set aside for affordable housing.

The focal point of the entire proposal is the dedication of 125.5 acres to the state as a salamander preserve that will be funded and managed by a \$300,000 Holcomb Corp. endowment, plus annual \$120 homeowner assessments.

The plans for the preserve are specific: Seven tunnels will be developed to provide the salamanders undisturbed access to their summer habitat. Two ponds will be created as a breeding habitat enhancement. Eucalyptus trees, whose leaves exude a toxin that would interfere with salamander breeding, will be cut down. The list goes on.

But the audience said the proposed

plan still doesn't adequately deal with the project's potential for degrading the human habitat with increased traffic, school enrollment and sewage-treatment needs, among other problems.

Several in the audience said the EIR still skims over school crowding, which can only get worse after 142 new families move in. Project consultant Linda Niebank responded with a bit of information about state budget funding for schools, but confessed she wasn't an expert. The EIR briefly mentions year-round schools or additional taxes to deal with the increased enrollment.

Project consultants agreed that area traffic will also increase and must be dealt with, but they had no concrete plans, just possible alternatives.

Pam and Mike McClendon live on Seascapes Boulevard, where one entrance to the development is now situated. They said they can't open their front door now

without 50 cars whizzing by, and wondered how any more traffic could be accommodated.

Vic Ruzich, a member of Citizens to Preserve the Seascapes Uplands, said sewage treatment for the area was already at capacity and couldn't handle any more. The EIR briefly acknowledges that the sewage-treatment plant is at capacity and that "the project would result in an incremental increase in the demands for all public services."

Holcomb consultants told the crowd they envision final county action on the project this summer. The Habitat Conservation Plan should start up next year, they said.

But as the evening wore on, frustration in the audience seemed to grow, and people speculated as they got up to leave that with all the problems that remain to be worked out, the proposed time track is about 10 years ahead of reality.