Flower's fate awaits decision

By STEVE PEREZ
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SCOTTS VALLEY — A tiny, little known flower is weighing heavily on the minds of members of the Scotts Valley City Council.

As of late Monday night, they had yet to make a decision at a special meeting on whether or not to accept an environmental impact report on the Polo Ranch development on the 116-acre abandoned Santa's Village amusement park.

The report came under attack by environmentalists who are championing the cause of the rare Scotts Valley (Hartweg's) Spineflower. The pleas followed a two-hour presentation by the project's developers.

The Dividend Development Co. is offering to preserve colonies of the plant and collect spineflower seeds for propagation and replanting on the site.

Stanford botanist John H. Thomas, author of a book on flora of the Santa Cruz mountains, who was hired as a consultant by the city, said that while the mitigation measures proposed would not "guarantee" the survival of the species, they would at least give it a "very good chance of survival."

He also suggested the plant could be found in other areas, noting the plant had been found on Fort Ord property in Monterey County.

Stephen McCabe, president of the Santa Cruz County Chapter of the California Native Plant Society, argued for more review.

He said the document as presented was significantly changed since the 45-day public comment period ended and by law, an additional period of comment and review was required.

Among the significant new information, he said, were the results of vegetation surveys that were still being conducted as late as April and May.

A letter from state Department of Fish and Game biologist Armand Gonzales was submitted that said the spineflower was being submitted to the state for review as an endangered species, and criticized the company's mitigation measures as "inadequate."

"The mitigation measures proposed have not been endorsed by the department, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, nor the California Native Plant Society," he wrote. "The measures are considered theoretical and experimental and the probability for success is unknown."