

Fish and Trees Walk the Plank on the S.S. Galleon Heights

by Greg Beebe

A planning commissioner, two environmentalists, an official of the County Watershed Department and developer Bill Nugent put their bickering aside last week and spoke to the *Indy* about the Galleon Heights housing development in Boulder Creek. Galleon was tentatively approved by the planning commission two weeks ago and will soon go before the board of supervisors.

Nugent's proposal for 176 units in the Galleon Heights subdivision near Boulder Creek Country Club was given a partial OK by the county planning commission during a meeting late in February.

If the supervisors concur, the development potential of the project stands to increase. The proposed site rests on 160 acres owned by Nugent — half of the 47 lots in the first 31-acre phase of the development (originally approved by the supes in 1975) have been built.

Although Nugent did get the green light for the second phase of the development, he must first meet conditions set by the planning commission regarding erosion control, water run-off and siltation. He must also prove there is adequate water at the site to support the development.

Commissioners Celia von der Muhll and Charles Rowe voted against the project, while planners Ivan "Skip" Eberly, Bill Gotthold and John Dixon voted in favor.

Even though he said he "had sympathy with Mr. Nugent for the difficulties he's gone through" in the long and in-

volved project, Rowe said he thought the density of Galleon Heights was "too high."

"I sensed there could be problems," Rowe said. "It's a highly-complex land development issue," Rowe said. "Much of the planning and political history of the decade has been written with this project in the forefront."

Environmentalist Mary Hammer of Save the San Lorenzo Association called the meeting "a sham" at its conclusion, and elaborated on that comment two weeks ago.

"It's not an area that should have that high a density of development," she said. Hammer was particularly disturbed that "the whole planning process is looking at an area made subservient to one developer's wishes."

Siltation, erosion and sand build-up in the San Lorenzo River were Hammer's main concerns. "As our streams become more and more turbid, we have to add more and more chlorine treatment to the [drinking] water."

Hammer also mentioned the high nitrate content in San Lorenzo Valley creeks and streams and the fact the Valley has 95 septic tanks per square mile, which is the highest ratio in the state.

Nugent came under fire when sedimentation allegedly originating from Galleon Heights recently choked Bracken Brae reservoir after winter rains.

Two weeks ago he was served an order from the Regional

Water Quality Control Board (RWQCB) to clean up Bracken Brae reservoir. He cleaned it up once, then took legal action of his own. He was successful in obtaining a writ of prohibition from Santa Cruz Superior Court which at least temporarily clears him of responsibility for Bracken Brae sedimentation until yet another hearing.

Bracken Brae, said Nugent, "has had a history since 1913 of having to clean the sand out of their reservoir."

Nugent said Bracken Brae "figures they can keep bringing political pressure down [on me] . . . to get their system rebuilt . . . this will come to a head," Nugent said.

John Ricker of the County Watershed Department said new developments are "definitely where most of the sediment is coming from."

"The level of earth disturbance is quite a bit more than we'd like to see," Ricker said.

Ricker's agency has counted a total of 600 fish (mostly steelhead) passing through the San Lorenzo so far this year, which is a "significant decline from what was originally estimated to have been there. I think the main thing (behind the decline) is the sedimentation of the river, which destroys the spawning habitats and rearing areas for young fish," Ricker said.

The amount of sedimentation in the San Lorenzo has increased by 80 per cent since 1966, while the number of

steelhead and silver salmon has decreased by almost an identical percentage. "Things haven't got any better," Ricker understated.

Even though Ricker is discouraged by the declining number of fish traveling up the San Lorenzo, he said "there is a way to build it back up. Each fish lays a tremendous amount of eggs. If we can clean up their habitat, the fish will be able to build up their population. The river could be restored to what it once was but it all depends on what we want to do with it," Ricker said.

Brett Hall of the California Native Plant Society reported recently that a rare grove of Santa Cruz Cypress trees (*Cupressus abramsiana*) stands smack dab in the middle of the proposed Galleon Heights development.

Hall said the rare trees are confined to about four groves in the Bonny Doon, Eagle Rock and Bracken Brae areas. He said the trees are "endemic," meaning they are confined to the Santa Cruz Mountains where they grow in highly-sterile inland sandstone deposits.

The presence of the Cypress trees on the site, said Hall, makes for a "very delicate situation." The trees, Hall said, are on the Native Plant Society's endangered list and are "one of the rarest trees in the world."

"They can't be replaced," Hall said. "There is no intention of saving the trees [on the part of Nugent] as far as I can see," Hall said.

"The fact the Santa Cruz Cypress exists [at the site] came to our attention a long time after the use permit had been issued," Nugent said.

"The California Native Plant Society and some local foresters have taken seeds and they're growing hundreds of them for transplant . . . They propagate regularly under controlled conditions," Nugent said.

"It's not like you're looking down the rifle at the last dinosaur, getting ready to shoot it," Nugent said.

"Since my development was [originally] approved in '71-'72, there have been some 3000 homes built in the Valley," Nugent said, "the majority of them on lot splits and old lots created under the very worst conditions."

Galleon Heights, said its developer, is an effort to "do it in a totally proper manner." Nugent said he has obtained a "target image."

"The guy who tries to do it right . . . according to the law, throws himself up for public attention," Nugent said.

Nugent pointed out the "millions of dollars of taxpayers' money that has been spent trying to stop me," not to mention the many hours of court time.

Nugent has worked on the Galleon Heights project too long and seen too many things happen to predict just what might happen in the future.

"All it takes is one more simple thing like the Cecil Smith tragedy, a governor's appointment, and I'm out of business," Nugent lamented. □