

New battle looms over Wingspread

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The Wingspread Beach Conference Center proposed for the Porter Sesnon property in Aptos does not need additional environmental review, Santa Cruz County planners have determined.

This conclusion, contained in an April 9 letter by county Planning Director Kris Schenk, means the controversial development proposal will avoid another six- to 12-month delay before it goes back to the Board of Supervisors for a final vote.

In his letter, Schenk reported that the Environmental Impact Report conducted on Wingspread in 1985 adequately reviews the potential effects of the project.

Wingspread, the vision of Palo Alto-developer Ryland Kelley, would place 485 vacation rentals, a conference center, a three-hall performing arts center and playing fields on 72 acres of oceanfront property across Highway 1 from Cabrillo College.

Schenk's decision has drawn harsh criticism from members of Friends of Porter Sesnon, a coalition formed seven years ago to fight Wingspread.

Celia Scott-Von der Muhll, an attorney for the group, said Schenk's conclusion runs contrary to California environmental law. In a six-page letter disputing Schnek's conclusion, Scott-Von der Muhll noted that "an accurate, stable and finite" project must be submitted for environmental review.

Since the 1985 Environmental Impact Report the project has changed significantly, she said.

For one thing, the county has proposed becoming a partner in Wingspread, but the fiscal impacts of that arrangement have not been analyzed, she said.

The commercial areas of the project have been increased, as well, she said, but no one has reviewed the increased traffic that will result.

Schenk's recommendations, however, did not displease Aptos-Capitola Supervisor Robley Levy, who has held the swing vote on the project since it was approved in concept in 1986.

In January, Levy provided the third vote needed to delete two key requirements for the project: direct freeway access to Wingspread and additional playing fields on a six-acre parcel adjacent to the Porter Sesnon property.

Both requirements most certainly would have called for extensive environmental review. Their deletion removed obstacles that threatened to delay the project for several years.

In reaction to Schenk's conclusions, Levy said, "It would have been very hard to call for an additional EIR" when the overall square-footage of the project had been cut by 25 percent and the developer had promised to keep 85 percent of the property in open space.

The county will allow public comments on Schenk's letter until April 24. Then the project will go back to county planners so they can prepare the application for final review by the supervisors at a date yet to be determined.