



## REST STOP: DUELING SIDES DEBATE WHETHER CHAPEL PLAN WOULD ENDANGER MONARCH BUTTERFLIES IN SANTA CRUZ



PAULINE LUBENS — MERCURY NEWS

The Oblates of St. Joseph have been trying for two years to win approval to extend their parking lot into this lawn area near their chapel at the corner of West Cliff Drive and Pelton Avenue in Santa Cruz. Opponents say the plan threatens a nearby butterfly habitat.

# Parking plan quagmire pits pews vs. visiting monarchs

✓ Butterflies  
By David L. Beck  
Mercury News

You'd think it would be simple: Religious organization seeks OK to expand parking lot. City staff considers, questions, makes recommendation. Zoning board votes yes or no. End of story.

But in Santa Cruz, the plans of the Catholic order called the Oblates of St. Joseph have become a never-ending story.

The reasons are not hard to find.

Across the street from the parking lot is Lighthouse Field, where monarch butterflies spend the winter in increasing numbers. Lighthouse Field, now a state beach, is holy ground to local progressives, who first organized in the 1970s to defend the site against a conference center project. The progressives now dominate local politics.

Part of the Oblates' property is leased to a private school that has been the source of endless friction with neighbors over traffic, noise and lights. Neighbors say the parking lot expansion would create a new exit and more traffic on the side street between the Oblates' property and Lighthouse Field.

In addition, the Oblates' site plan shows a future social hall behind their chapel. It's only a dotted line on a drawing now, but opponents smell another conference center battle. They call the parking lot a Trojan horse that, once approved, would make further expansion easier.

Perhaps most perplexing for the Oblates is that the concerns all stem from a



Carla Andrus is one of the visitors who flock to see resting monarch butterflies near the Oblates of St. Joseph.

plan to expand parking when that was never their priority; it was pews. But under city ordinances, if you add seating, you have to add parking.

"This was triggered by the city's own requirements," said city council member

§Jmr. 2-25-01  
Scott Kennedy. "We ourselves did a subdivision and sold lots on Pelton" — the street that divides Lighthouse Field from the Oblates' property — "and nobody raised questions."

They have now. The Oblates' application was approved by the zoning board in October. Neighbors appealed. The city council heard arguments in December and January. Tuesday the council will consider ordering another study.

The Oblates of St. Joseph, founded in 1878 by Joseph Marell — that's his statue on the front lawn, not far from the city's surfer monument across the road — bought property on West Cliff Drive near Pelton Avenue in 1933 and added to it in 1949. Now, with seven acres of prime bay-view real estate, it holds the headquarters for the order's Province of California, as well as a residence, chapel and buildings used by Gateway School, a private elementary school.

The chapel, with its distinctive Jewish star in honor of St. Joseph, was begun in 1952 and finally completed in 1993, with room for 64 pews or 408 seats. At that point the city told the Oblates they needed at least 117 parking spaces under a formula that requires one space for every 3.5 seats.

In its current configuration, the parking lot has space for 100 cars, according to an opponent of the plan; 84 cars, according to the Oblates' local leader; or 92 cars, according to a Mercury News count. All agree that some spaces in-

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volve double-parking.

It's possible that had the Oblates redone the parking lot in 1993 as part of the chapel project, no one would have blinked. But they couldn't afford to do so. Instead, they walled off part of the chapel and called it a social hall, and went with seating for 204 while they set about raising money for the project.

From 1993 to 1999, when the Oblates sought permission to expand the parking lot, two things happened to raise the consciousness — or intensify the suspicions — of neighbors.

"What we had dealt with," said attorney Dennis Kelly, a leader of the anti-parking-lot forces, "was ... a very contentious four years of hearings" over Gateway School's use permit. When the same consulting firm that had represented the school signed on to shepherd the Oblates' application, "Our antenna went up about a thousand feet," he said.

Meanwhile, the monarch habitat at Natural Bridges State Park, once home to as many as 80,000 butterflies in midwinter, was eroding, and the butterflies began to shift their overwintering roost to Lighthouse Field. The Oblates' consultants brought in local butterfly expert Elizabeth Bell, who blessed the project, but once the project was approved by the zoning board, the perceived danger to the monarchs became one of the key elements in the appeal.

Bell had reported that the expanded parking lot would not significantly affect the butterflies or endanger them more than Pelton Avenue already does. She pointed out that the principal roost trees are at least 150 feet from the proposed parking site, and at her suggestion several changes were made in the landscaping plans to increase the butterflies' supply of winter nectar.

## Battle of experts

Opponents countered with Travis Longcore, an instructor and researcher at the University of California-Los Angeles and the University of Southern California with a sideline in examining projects for their environmental impact by studying the documents involved. He found the documents in this case flawed, largely because the city had defined that part of the waterfront as an "environmentally sensitive habitat area" for monarchs by simply drawing a circle around it on a general plan map.

Opponents of the plan call the half-acre of lawn the Oblates propose to pave a meadow, a monarch habitat and even a seasonal wetland (the drainage isn't very good). But the city's general plan is vague, leaving the definition of precisely where the monarch areas are located for a later time. Those studies still have not been done, and Longcore argues that in their absence it is impossible to say whether the lawn is or is not habitat.

Longcore has never visited the site and says he doesn't need to. That doesn't set well with Bell.

"No reputable scientist would ever do that," she said. "I'll tell you one thing. I'm insulted by the fact that someone who's not an expert in monarch biology was given equivalent credibility. If you get experts to disagree, you can throw it out."

Which is what happened. The California Environmental Quality Act "requires that if there's any expert testimony on appellants' side that supports the appellants' point of view, then you need to do further study," said council member Emily Reilly. "That doesn't mean just because a few neighbors were talking about it."

## Other options

Is compromise possible?

One common view is that the parking problem would disappear if the Oblates agreed to schedule two Masses a day instead of one — something the general counsel for the Diocese of Monterey says they have a right to do.

Another is that the Oblates should bring the number of seats, now at 204, up to the level their parking already supports, which would be 294 (taking the lowest estimate of current parking spaces) or even 350 (taking the highest).

The Rev. Phillip Masetti, the Oblates' provincial of California, says

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— BUTTERFLY EXPERT ELIZABETH BELL

such proposals miss the point. "They don't really understand what our ministry is here for," he said. The shrine attracts locals and tourists as well as what Masetti calls "pilgrims," and "when we have large groups coming from outside the area, they want to have a service they all can attend together." He compares it to inviting people for dinner: You don't serve them separately.

Besides, he says, the Oblates have been compromising all along:

"Two years ago, when we applied, we applied for 66 parking spaces. To get approved by the zoning board, we had to come down to 48. And then now, what we've proposed to the city since our last meeting in January is that we're willing to even now go down another 13 to 35. And to even have that, we're going to have to apply for a variance to the code.

"In a spirit of compromise, we've almost cut it in half from the initial request. And I don't think that was made clear."

Nor would he consider moving the new spaces to another site on the property, away from the street and the butterfly grove.

"Gee," he said, in a spirit of gentle exasperation, "we've gone through all this. This is just ... just a proper place for it."

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