

Goat farm owners lose round with SC county

Goat Ranch

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SANTA CRUZ — It was another bad day for John and Brenda Stephenson in front of the Santa Cruz County Board of Supervisors Tuesday. The board reversed earlier decisions by their Planning Commission and blocked the construction of a large barn on the Stephenson property north of Santa Cruz, which is the home to a large herd of goats used by the Stephensons' company, Santa Cruz Biotech, for research purposes.

The supervisors said on a 4-1 vote the structure would have to wait until a full environmental impact report is completed on the entire biotech operation on the North Coast property. The Stephensons want to build the 8,000-square-foot structure to house eight horses. Supervisor Walt Symons cast the lone "no" vote, saying the action would not be fair to the Stephensons after they were told earlier the report was not required.

Supervisor Tony Campos voted with the majority but was sympathetic to the plight of the Stephensons, who have been battling their neighbors over the operation for more than three years.

"The guy (Stephenson) has done everything we asked," he said. "There's no other way to get this (barn) approved (except with a completed EIR)."

The Planning Department recommended on two previous occasions that a "negative declaration" was appropriate. After they reversed themselves, the staff report said the project could be "growth-inducing" because it provides infrastructure that could allow the goat herd to expand.

The staff also said a new report shows there are cracks in the ground near a well being used by the Stephensons that may affect the

wells on nearby properties.

Supervisor Jeff Almquist asked, "Where's the growth inducement?"

Staff members said water lines and electricity leading to the building could "prejudice" impact on other facilities (for the goats). Almquist said he didn't buy into the analysis, but went along with the majority because of the report on the well. "I hate to see environmental rules and laws torqued to halt a project," he said.

The Stephensons are in the process of developing a master plan for the property that will ultimately determine the number of goats they can allow to graze on the site, as well as the number of structures. The plan has been completed but it is currently undergoing environmental review. The horse barn will be considered as part of the report.

To make matters worse, the latest readings on storm run-off from the goat operation put together by the Stephensons, their neighbors, and the Environmental Health Department showed water in the drainage area from the ranch contained high fecal coliform counts at the ranch and downstream.

John Ricker of the Environmental Health Department told the board the readings were not unusual because "all streams and tributaries have a jump in bacteria counts during and immediately following rain storms." Samples collected by Santa Cruz Biotech indicate even higher counts than those developed by the county. One test showed bacteria counts at 99,000 per one million parts. (A safe level for humans is 400 parts per million). While the counts were high, Ricker also pointed out last month that counts will be higher in small streams because of concentration.

Ranch manager Matt Mullen told the board if the samples are a problem they should allow the company

to extend the roof line of the goat barn and build manure bunkers which would keep the waste matter from the goats from getting into the drainage area. The board would not allow the construction to take place even though it was recommended by the Regional Water Quality Control Board.

The supervisors said they wanted another report on the water quality early next month.

Families In Transition

The board approved a \$300,000 contract with Families in Transition to set up a Housing Scholarship Program after Wormhoudt and Almquist raised questions about the high administrative costs of the program. Wormhoudt pointed out only 45 people would be helped by the program, "at about \$1,000 each."

Human Resources Department Administrator Cecilia Espinola said only half of the grant will be spent during the rest of the fiscal year, while the rest will be spent between July and December "and will be phased down."

The board approved the program on the condition the staff bring a report back at budget time.

Activist challenge

Once again homeless advocates in Santa Cruz demanded the supervisors investigate Sheriff Mark Tracy's jail operation, alleging brutality to Steven Argue, a Santa Cruz man who was sentenced to county jail after slugging a police officer during an anti-war demonstration last year.

Following 10 minutes of angry testimony, Wormhoudt told the protesters the sheriff was an independent elected official and the board of supervisors could not mandate policy. She told the group to take the issue to the Sheriff.