

An Aptos version of Central Park

By ADRIANA REYNERI
STAFF WRITER

Thanks to a recently negotiated agreement, Santa Cruz County has the chance to buy property that could become a local version of Manhattan's Central Park.

That's the vision parks director Ben Angove holds for the 62-acre Aptos Polo Grounds. Richard Hunter agreed to sell the prized property to the county for \$2.7 million. The settlement ends seven months of negotiations over the parcel.

Angove's self-described ecstasy over the settlement was hardly shared by Bob Stoessel, head of a coalition of religious groups that has pursued its own vision of the Polo Grounds for the past three years.

The group, known as

ECHO, viewed the meadow as the best place in the county for a retirement complex, including 204 townhouses, 150 "congregate-care" living units and a 99-bed nursing home on the property. In pursuit of its vision, the non-profit ECHO paid \$6,300 in planning fees and made payments totalling \$25,000 on a five-year purchase option it held with Hunter.

According to Stoessel, Hunter made a "satisfactory" offer to buy out ECHO's option.

Stoessel said the group will put its plans on hold until the county's purchase of the Polo Grounds is completed.

"There's many a slip between the cup and the lip," Stoessel said, using the old axiom to explain why the

group hasn't yet scrapped its Polo Ground plans. If the deal goes through, Stoessel said, ECHO will request a partial refund of its planning fees and will begin looking for "the second best" parcel in the county for its retirement complex.

The county's final offer of \$2.7 million was \$200,000 more than the \$2.5 million value placed on the property by an appraiser, Angove said. The parks director explained that the appraiser had given a range of values and that the \$2.5 million quote was at the low end.

Angove has proposed buying the property by issuing "certificates of participation," a financial tool available to counties for borrowing money. The certificates will be repaid by park dedication fees levied on new

developments.

The Board of Supervisors will hold another hearing on the purchase plan, then vote on the proposal. If the board approves the purchase, as expected, Angove said his department can begin designing the park by January.

"I'm absolutely ecstatic," Angove said. "Down the road it can be viewed as the Santa Cruz version of Central Park. Development will take place all around the park. That will be a salvaged area."

Angove said he wants to involve the community in the design of the park. So far, residents have told the parks department they want playing fields and a community center, but no night lights at the park. Following those suggestions, Angove said, the county could preserve the character of the quiet neighborhood, yet provide facilities that can be actively used during the day.