Local

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City Council approves EIR for housing project

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The truth about the environmental impacts of a huge housing project proposed near Watsonville Slough appears to be as elusive as the seldom-seen Santa Cruz long-toed salamander itself.

After listening to four hours of often-conflicting public testimony from wildlife experts hired by the developer, J. Lohr, and representatives of the Sierra Club, California Native Plant Society and other ecology groups, the Watsonville City Council last night decided an environmental impact report prepared for the project was adequate.

That decision bumps the project up to the next phase — a General Plan amendment and rezoning — which will be discussed at the council's Feb. 26 meeting.

Several council members tempered their approval of the EIR of the project, called The Villages, by saying they would like to see more steps taken to mitigate the impacts of the project. Those conditions can be added to the project later in the process.

Council members were also under a bit of pressure to approve the EIR because funding for the 136 affordable-housing units on the site couldn't go forward without it.

"To certify an EIR means it's adequate," said Mayor Todd McFarren before voting, "It does not mean it's perfect ... Obviously there are competing experts.

Frankly, I've been impressed by some of the environmental concerns addressed here tonight (by opponents of the project)."

McFarren said he wanted to see some of the suggestions made by opponents, such as re-routing a proposed road to preserve more of the habitat of the Santa Cruz tarplant, an endangered species that grows on 3.7 acres of the 150-acre site, incorporated into the project. The developer is proposing, under the supervision of the state Fish and Game Department, to move the tarplant from its current site and plant it elsewhere.

"I'm no expert, but it seems to me that a species has a better chance of surviving where it's at," he said. "But we don't need to make that decision tonight."

Residents and environmentalists dueled with the developer and his consultants over everything from the impact of the project on the salamanders and frogs, small mammals, raptors and native plant life, to exactly where the wetlands are, to water rights and drainage problems.

Linda Wilson, representing the Santa Cruz chapter of the Native Plant Society, said the group was "very dissatisfied with the current mitigation measures" especially as they concern the tarplant. Most native plants don't transplant well, she said.

But Dean Taylor, an endangered-species botanist with BioSystems Analysis Inc. in Santa Cruz, read from a paper published

five years ago in the Native Plant Society's publication about a successful tarplant replanting project.

John Zentner, of Zentner and Zentner, a land-planning and restoration firm with offices in Walnut Creek and Capitola, rebutted a remark made early by resident Jerry Busch that the project would be filled wetlands. Part of the Lohr project includes a restoration of the wetlands, with plantings of native wetland grasses in the slough. Native trees will also be planted on the project site.

Several speakers said they were concerned that the loss of habitat for small mammals would affect the raptor population.

Zentner said it was possible one or two birds of prey would be lost

as a result of the project. But, he said, a greater variety of species will be attracted to the area once the wetlands are restored.

Bob Peterson, assistant superintendent of business for the Pajaro Valley Unified School District, said the district has been meeting with the developer to discuss how to mitigate the additional students expected as a result of the project. Peterson said about 779 additional students will live in the project. Although no agreement has been made, "I'm optimistic we can have one in the future," he said.

At the end of the hearing, Councilman Parr Eves praised J. Lohr for the time and money he's expending in an attempt to mitigate the negative impacts of the project.