

Polo Grounds designated for park by supervisors

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An effort to develop housing on the Aptos Polo Grounds for elderly persons has suffered a setback.

Santa Cruz County supervisors voted yesterday to designate the 62-acre meadow a regional park.

The action bitterly disappointed members of the Ecumenical Community Housing Organization (ECHO), a coalition of churches and synagogues seeking to build townhouses, congregate-care units and a nursing home there.

The designation could delay development of the area north of the Rio del Mar freeway exit for as long as three years — or stop it entirely. It gives the county a one-year option to buy the property once it's proposed for development and an addi-

tional two years to raise the money to buy the land.

ECHO members had asked the supervisors to delay voting on the designation until they had a chance to review the group's development proposal.

Instead, Aptos-Capitola Supervisor Robley Levy recommended the board do just the opposite and led her fellow supervisors into voting on the

application to the county.

Levy said ECHO's preliminary plans contained some very "attractive components," namely a non-profit nursing home and congregate-care units for the elderly.

"The project, however, is much more than that," she said. The plans also propose construction of more than 200 townhouses that would be sold

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parks designation yesterday.

The board is scheduled to give final approval of the designation Tuesday, Dec. 16.

Levy said it would be fair for the board to act on the Polo Grounds before ECHO filed a final application for the project and paid the county more than \$5,000 in planning fees.

Sherry Mehl, supervisor-elect from the Watsonville area, questioned voting before a study on the feasibility of developing the Polo Grounds as a regional park had been completed. Mehl, who is awaiting an appointment to serve the rest of former supervisor, E. Wayne Moore Jr.'s term, will have no official status until she is appointed. The supervisors ignored her suggestion.

In urging a parks designation, Levy said, "It's clear there's a conflict of public needs."

She acknowledged the need for housing for the elderly and for parks in Aptos, but said she thought the most vital aspects of the ECHO project could be built elsewhere.

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Levy also reminded the ECHO proponents that the supervisors could not "preempt" the planning process by considering the ECHO project before the group had even submitted a final

at "market rates," meaning they would probably be affordable only to more affluent older people.

That development would be a separate parcel developed privately. In the end, the Polo Grounds could become a "Rossmoor" of Santa Cruz, Levy said, referring to a luxury retirement community near Walnut Creek.

Santa Cruz-area Supervisor Gary Patton said he would "keep an open mind" toward developing the Polo Grounds as either a park or a senior citizens housing project, but he said either project called for a change in the General Plan, which designates the Polo Grounds for organic farming.

"Both of the projects suggested run into that major obstacle in my mind," Patton said. "It's going to be very, very hard to convince me our General Plan is wrong."

Disappointed ECHO representatives said they would apply for development despite the obstacle of a park designation.

"I think we need to talk to Robley," said Bob Barton, an Aptos consultant who is donating his services to the ECHO project. "Robley doesn't understand the project ... She doesn't realize how many people living in her district are really excited about it."