



Councilwoman Celia Scott, right, supports saving the redwoods, and Mayor Mike Rotkin has yet to decide.

Kill the kilns?

Delicate political decision for council

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SANTA CRUZ — To cut or not to cut.

That is the question before the City Council, which must decide whether to save three historic lime kilns in the upper Pogonip, or the eight redwood trees growing in and around the root-ensnared ovens.

The vote next Tuesday will be a political hot potato for council members, who must contend with dueling recommendations from the Parks and Recreation Commission (save the trees) and the Historic Preservation Commission (save the kilns).

"If we don't cut the redwoods the lime kilns are history, so to speak," said Mayor Mike Rotkin, who hasn't decided how he will vote.

Councilwoman Celia Scott, however, has decided. She supports protecting the trees.

"The lesson of history is that the kilns destroyed the redwoods, and now the redwoods are coming back," Scott said. "You could call it poetic justice."

In the mid- to late 1800s, Santa Cruz County was the lime capital of the United States, according to local historian Frank Perry. In 1880, for instance, out of the 250,000 barrels of lime produced in California, 115,000 of them came from Santa Cruz County.

The kilns proved costly to the area's old-growth redwood stands. Seventy cords of redwood were burned each time a load of lime-stone was fired to extract the barrels of lime used to make mortar and concrete.

But not everyone sees the kilns as the villains of the piece.

"The lime kilns are a very important link to the past," Perry said. "Were it not for the lime industry in Santa Cruz County, there

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would be no UCSC or Henry Cowell (Redwoods) State Park."

The pieces of land now occupied by the university and the park were donated by the Cowell Foundation, an outgrowth of the fortune amassed by Henry Cowell, who was one of the kings of the local limestone industry.

But the issue isn't simply personal preference for historical artifacts vs. trees.

Experts hired by the city said that although leaving the trees would sound a death knell for the kilns, taking them out doesn't guarantee the ovens' survival.

"One of the things that concerns me is that removing the trees is considered stabilization, but not restoration," Scott said. "It could destabilize them further because the roots are part of the structure."

Scott said the \$36,000 price tag to remove the trees is too steep, considering that it doesn't take into consideration how much actually preserving the kilns would cost.

Hans Brinker, a member of the Parks and Recreation Commission,

told the council in a letter that the vibration caused by the heavy equipment necessary to remove the trees could "rip apart sections of the kilns."

In addition, roots from trees up to 40 feet from the grove of eight redwoods and one Douglas fir nearest the kiln eventually could snake into the kilns and force the city to take even more trees.

"The fact (is) that even with the trees removed, the deteriorated, unreinforced masonry walls will be unsafe and will need stabilization," Brinker said. "In their advanced level of deterioration, it would be best to 'allow nature to take its course.'"

There are 12 sites in Santa Cruz County where lime kilns still exist. Each site — ranging from UCSC to Pogonip to Fall Creek State Park in Felton — has anywhere from one to four kilns.

The three kilns along the Rincon Trail in the northwestern portion of Pogonip may be oldest in the county. Some suggest that at least one of them may date back to Santa Cruz's mission period, which began in 1791.

"We know the mission had kilns, and we don't know where they were," said local historian Edna Kimbro, who wants the Pogonip kilns preserved. "It's a question of how many redwood trees do we have in California vs. how many lime kilns. The answer is maybe a million to one."

Michael Bates, a member of the city's Historic Preservation Commission, also noted that trees "are a renewable resource" while "historically speaking, the lime kilns are irreplaceable."

Scott said nature, not people, will have its way with the kilns. In the latest issue of the Ventana Chapter of the Sierra Club newspaper, she wrote:

"Not long ago I visited the kiln site and meditated there with my back against the giant redwood that sits astride the central buttress. I asked for guidance. What came back to me was quite simple and clear:

"This is my home. I am rooted here, I belong here. People come and go. The works of humans and the works of nature are blended here now. The balance is being restored."