

Wingspread debate produces few sparks

By KATHARINE BALL
STAFF WRITER

Supporters of Wingspread insisted last night that the site of the proposed hotel-conference center-performing arts complex will become an RV park if developer Ryland Kelley does not receive the go-ahead from county voters in June.

Mitchell Page, spokesman for the opponents, who want the Porter Sesnon property adjacent to New Brighton Beach to remain as open space, maintained the RV park threat "is a red herring to scare people."

The argument became a focal point of the first formal debate on Wingspread, held last night at Aptos Junior High School, and sponsored by the Aptos Neighbors Association.

About 80 people attended the polite debate, where few sparks flew.

The "Yes on A" campaign (supporting Wingspread) had attempted to pack the hall with

supporters, by sending out fliers urging attendance.

But the faithful and the doubters appeared to have turned out in about equal numbers.

Aptos resident Rowland Rebele, who is chairman of the "Yes on A" campaign committee and prominent in the music scene in Santa Cruz County, spoke in support of Wingspread.

Page took on the role of loyal opposition.

Rebele fired the opening salvo. "If Measure A fails, there is no question it will be developed with RV sites. The developer has declared his intentions in that regard," he said. "There is no chance the property will remain open space."

Rebele also said if the state parks department purchases the property — opponents claim it wants to — the beachside field would still become an RV park or campground.

Such a use of the land would have none of the benefits that Wingspread would offer to the county, Rebele said.

Not only would developer Kelley provide the county with three performing-arts halls costing \$10 million to construct, he would also provide an endowment fund of \$500,000 annually to run them, Rebele claimed. Room rental from the 468-unit hotel would yield the cash-hungry county at least \$1 million a year as part of a complicated lease-back agreement in which the county temporarily would hold title to the Porter Sesnon land, Rebele said.

In addition, the project would put another \$800,000 to \$1 million into the Santa Cruz area in annual property taxes, Rebele said. The county would receive 40 percent of the tax, with school and other special districts divvying up the remaining 60 percent, he said.

Page said the dream of big money for the county was pie in the sky.

He said an independent financial analyst estimated Wingspread would need a 76 percent annual occupancy rate to succeed, while other coastal getaway resorts in Santa Cruz County, such as Pajaro Dunes, were averaging 40 percent to 60 percent occupancy per year.

"The room rents drive this machine," Page said. "If the rooms don't get rented, you don't see the money."

Page said the county has never done a sufficient financial analysis to verify whether the project really would generate the big money Kelley claims it will.

Page called the project "a boondoggle riddled with deceptions."

Page also charged that Kelley is a developer with a history of broken promises.

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forecast

Partly cloudy. Friday sunny after patchy morning fog.

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One Kelley project intended to be a shopping mall is now a Hewlett-Packard warehouse, Page alleged.

Page said Kelley is "a fellow followed around by lawsuits."

Rebele responded, "You can't be in business without getting lawsuits. Nobody bats 100 percent on anything. Ninety-five percent of (Kelley's) projects are successful."

The two men also argued about the extent of support in the arts community for the project.

Page contended the proposed theater complex "will compete with efforts to renovate other halls." He cited the Fox Theater in Watsonville and attempts to restore Santa Cruz Civic Auditorium.

An audience member asked why no performing arts organization in the county had endorsed the Wingspread project. The answer, from both men, seemed to be that arts groups, dependent on contributions from patrons and foundations, are afraid to take sides in a controversy that has sharply divided county residents.

Rebele claimed individual members of the governing boards of the Santa Cruz Symphony and Cabrillo Music Festival support Wingspread but the business of those groups is simply "to make music."

Page contended, "There is considerable division among the arts groups in the community. But it is more problematic to state opposition to the project than support. If this passes, they will be looking to the Wingspread Foundation as the controller of arts in this county in the coming years."

The men also debated how much traffic the project would generate. Rebele sided with traffic studies for the project which estimate a maximum of 7,000 vehicle trips per day for it. Page cast doubt on the credibility of the study, and said the project could generate much more traffic.

Rebele, who lives near Clubhouse Drive in Aptos, said that street carries 9,000 vehicles a day. Traffic generated along McGregor Drive by Wingspread would be considerably lighter than that, he said.

Page told the audience, "Even if this is an excellent investment, we would be selling out one of the county's principal virtues — its coastal beauty — for money." He begged them not to go for "the quick fix."

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