

New charge leveled in Wingspread debate

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Another bitter Wingspread controversy has erupted, touched off this time by extravagant charges of conspiracy among state Sen. Henry Mello, Palo Alto developer Ryland Kelley and the state Department of Parks and Recreation.

Wingspread opponents and Mello critics have accused the Watsonville Democrat of pulling late-hour political maneuvers to help Kelley finance the Wingspread Beach conference center he proposes building on the Porter Sesnon property in Aptos.

A spokesman for Mello has said the accusations are unfounded; Kelley has called them ridiculous; and an official with the state Parks Department said people have become so concerned about Wingspread they're misconstruing events.

The charges were sparked by amendments to a bill providing \$4 million for state acquisition of the 66-acre Porter Sesnon property, the beachfront parcel on which Kelley wants to build the Wingspread development. The passage of the amendments on Aug. 30 prompted charges by Wingspread opponents that Mello was engaging in last-minute political shenanigans on behalf of Kelley — who has contributed generously to Mello's political campaigns — and his embattled Wingspread project.

Actually, the revisions, while they were not finally adopted until Aug. 30, had been introduced by Mello in February and have since received the scrutiny of committees in both the Senate and Assembly.

Nonetheless, the passage of Mello's amendments in the last hours of the Legislature's session resulted in Wingspread opponents charging that something sinister was afoot. They accused Mello and the state Parks Department of conspiring to help Kelley finance his plan to build condominiums, a conference center and performing-arts complex on the property adjacent to New Brighton State Beach.

Kelley controls Porter Sesnon through a 99-year lease he secured from the University of California in 1978. He owns out-

right, with his brother William, an adjacent six-acre parcel known as the Widera property. Mello's amendment would enable the state to purchase that parcel as well.

In fact, the inclusion of the Widera tract in the land the state would be authorized to buy for park purposes is essentially the only change in the original bill, adopted four years ago, that authorizes the state Parks Department to spend up to \$4 million to buy Porter Sesnon for use as a park.

Mello's amendment, however, specifies that the state could not buy the Widera parcel without first purchasing a major portion of the Porter Sesnon acreage.

Wingspread opponents say the amendments would enable Kelley to sell to the state, presumably at an enormous profit, that portion of the property that he won't use for his Wingspread Beach development. They point to the thousands of dollars Kelley has contributed to Mello's campaigns over the years and say it's clear Mello was acting out of friendship to the developer.

Not only have Kelley and Mello denied the charges, but, perhaps more significantly, a planner in the state Department of Parks and Recreation has said the state wouldn't be interested in buying a portion of the property for park use if a development such as Wingspread were to be erected on it.

"Our first preference is we would like to buy the whole property," said Ross Henry, of the department's Planning and Acquisitions division. "Our only other option would be to buy a major portion of it. I think some people are reading things into it (the amended bill) that are not accurate."

The parks department eyes the Porter Sesnon property as the perfect expansion for the neighboring New Brighton State Beach, which is filled to capacity all summer. The parcel must be big enough and suitable for additional campgrounds, recreation space and beach access, all badly needed in the area, Henry said.

The parks department is not interested in buying a buffer zone around a major development — as Mello's critics have suggested — and would not buy

any of Porter Sesnon or the Widera property if Wingspread were built, Henry said.

"Wingspread as it's currently proposed is not compatible with a state park," he said.

Kelley has said the charges are so far-fetched they are amusing, especially in light of the fact he is waiting for Santa Cruz County supervisors to give final approval to his Wingspread plan.

As part of the effort to win their approval, Kelley has proposed giving the Widera property and his lease on the Porter Sesnon to the county. Under the agreement, Kelley would build Wingspread Beach and run it as a county concession.

"How could we give something away and then be paid for it?" Kelley said.

Kelley said he has written a letter to McClatchy News Services demanding a retraction of statements made by columnist Dan Walters, who was the first to print the conspiracy charges.

Before writing the column, Walters discussed the issue with local activist Larry Frommham, who has attacked Wingspread, and Mello's alleged involvement with Kelley, in letters-to-the-editor and at other forums. Walters wrote that Mello's amendments "dovetail neatly" with Kelley's development plans by "allowing the state to acquire only that portion of the land that Kelley does not need for his development."

Kelley's response was, "The misinformation contained in that is so monumental and then the (Santa Cruz) Sentinel picked it up. It's really hilarious if you stop and think about it."

Kelley said he lost interest in the possibility of the state parks department buying the Porter Sesnon property a year ago after parks officials rejected Kelley's offer to develop Wingspread as a state concession.

"I don't know of any amendment made at the last minute and I don't know any reason why (one would be)," Kelley said. "I haven't had any contact with the bill for a long time. Henry just continued it (the appropriations bill) because it made good sense."

Mello's intentions in regard to the Porter Sesnon property

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haven't changed since 1982, when he introduced the first bill setting aside \$4 million for aquisition of the Porter Sesnon property, Teddi Chan, one of Mello's legislative aides, said.

Mello introduced the Widera amendment because the property, a long narrow strip fronting McGregor Drive, is an "integral link" between neighboring New Brighton State Beach and the Porter Sesnon property, Chan said. Mello did not intend the legislation to enable Kelley to sell the state his leftovers.

"The Department of Parks and Recreation has certain criteria," Chan said. "They just don't go around buying land vicariously. They're not going to buy a ravine. We want Porter Sesnon. We want it all. We want the whole thing."

He said that Mello merely wants to enable the parks department to buy as much of the Porter Sesnon and Widera property as possible in case Kelley's dealings with the county fall apart and the developer decides to sell to the state.

The most puzzling charges are those of last-minute maneuvering since Mello hasn't significantly changed the bill in regard to the Porter Sesnon property since February and hasn't touched it at all in that respect since July, Chan said.

The only last-minute changes were those made by Assemblyman Sam Farr, D-Carmel Valley, who carried the bill for Mello in the Assembly.

Farr's change had to do with the amount of Porter Sesnon property the state must buy before it can buy any of the Widera property. Farr substituted the word "majority" for "major" in an effort to make the amendment more palatable to environmentalists and Wingspread opponents, who harshly criticized him for carrying the compromise appropriations bill.

Santa Cruz-area Supervisor Gary Patton, an outspoken Wingspread critic, is one of the group who believes there's more to Mello's amendments than the desire to create more state park land in Midcounty.

"It sounds to me like the bill now has gone on over to being a Wingspread bill. To the best of my knowledge the state Parks Department has never indi-

cated much interest in the Widera property," Patton said.

"Mello is saying, 'Let's use state parks funds to buy a portion of the property that's needed as a condition for the Wingspread development.'"

Patton characterized the bill as Mello's attempt to use state park funds to facilitate Wingspread, but he conceded, "I'm not sure I'm right because I'm operating in the absence of some facts."

Aptos-Capitola Supervisor Robley Levy, who cast the swing vote giving Wingspread tentative approval, said sometimes it was difficult to tell whether Wingspread opponents were more interested in defeat-

ing Kelley or obtaining a state park.

"When Henry does this stuff it goes both ways," Levy said, referring to the fact that if the bill provides money to buy the land for a state park, it also, by necessity, provides money for Kelley, who owns the lease on the land.