

Stage now set for final battle over Wingspread

By BUD O'BRIEN

With the final environmental impact report on the proposed Wingspread Beach project now completed, the long battle over what the future holds for the valuable Porter Sesnon property in Aptos is entering its final phase.

There were few surprises contained in the EIR, which was prepared for the county by Coates Associates of Capitola. Most of the points and findings that had been made in the draft EIR last year were confirmed in the final document, although a number of refinements and changes were inserted.

The EIR focused on the proposal of the Palo Alto development firm of Hare, Brewer and Kelley — which has acquired a 99-year lease on the property from the University of California — for an ambitious development that would combine vacation-rental and conference facilities with a performing arts complex.

The original proposal called for 497 units of vacation, or "short-term" rentals, which would include two- and three-bedroom homes, a lodge-type facility and a conference center with rooms included. In addition, as an adjunct to the performing arts and "theater district" complex, it called for the development of 133 "long-term rental" units, which would presumably become housing for those working either full-time or seasonally in the theater district.

The performing arts complex would be made up of one main theater building and three smaller theaters for use by local performing groups.

Under the perhaps unique proposal, these cultural facilities would be turned over by the developer to a non-profit corporation and would be financed by taxes generated from the rental and conference facilities.

From the time that proposal was made public several years ago, it has been the focus of bitter debate, with the major opposition coming from the county's vigorously vocal environmental community, as well as from neighborhood groups that feared the impact of such a project on their community ambience.

A number of roadblocks have been erected against any such development on the 66-acre beachfront parcel across the freeway from Cabrillo College, the most powerful being zoning clamped on it by the environmentalist-oriented majority of the county Board of Supervisors. This zoning makes use as a park, with a limited number of camping spaces, the property's "preferred use." Only with reluctance and because of legal requirements did the board majority allow for an "alternate use," which would allow development but only at a scale far too small for the Wingspread proposal.

In addition, the state has been authorized to buy the lease on the land for state park use for \$4 million. Kelley, however, said he won't sell.

In response to all that, Kelley has offered to scale down the size of his project, though he says if it has to be reduced as much as the current zoning mandates, the cultural complex can't be built. He has offered to reduce the project to one of 295 units and the performing arts center. In order to do that, though, he would have to obtain an amendment to the general plan.

Kelley has warned that if such an amendment can't be obtained, he is prepared to build on the property what would in effect be a 200-unit hotel, period. This would include no cultural facilities, no performing arts buildings, etc.

The final EIR, which was released this week, shows that while there are many environmental problems with the proposed project, they can all be mitigated, Kelley asserts. Which means, he said, only the current zoning on the property stands in the way of the scaled-down Wingspread proposal.

The EIR lists many problems with the Wingspread proposal having to do with such things as traffic, sewage, wildlife habitat, land stability, etc. All of them, Kelley claims, can be taken care of by his firm.

The EIR confirms the developer's claim that the project would be a source of jobs and revenue for the county. It says "an annual net revenue of \$1.6 million per year will be generated from the project when constructed and operating" and that it would provide "a significant number of new jobs (350-400)." (Those figures would apply to the original proposal. The scaled-down project would presumably generate commensurately less money and fewer jobs.)

The EIR also takes an upbeat view of the proposal for the performing arts center, but that is also in reference to the original and larger project.

The EIR will now be subjected to public hearings and must finally be approved by the Board of Supervisors.

REFERENCE

