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# Council orders EIR of wetlands housing site

## Cost of Lee Road report to be paid by developer

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A longstanding debate over how to handle wetlands property targeted for housing development in Watsonville's as-yet unadopted General Plan finally bore some fruit last night, with the City Council's decision to have the parcel studied in a separate environmental impact report.

The council's 4-3 vote also calls for the EIR's cost to be paid by a private developer anxious to build a mixed-use project of affordable housing, upscale single-family homes and a golf course on the land.

The EIR will supplement the environmental report prepared in conjunction with the General Plan, and allow the area, known as west of Lee Road, to be included in the city's proposed urbanization boundary.

The additional EIR will provide technical information only. Specific projects would still require additional, in-depth studies of how development would impact the area.

Mayor Lowell Hurst voted for the report, saying the supplemental EIR would serve as "a land-use planning tool." He said he had

faith that development could be planned that was compatible with the wetlands.

The 850-acre parcel lies in an unincorporated portion of the county on the southwest corner of Watsonville and would be annexed to the city. If the city is to meet the housing goals written into its General Plan, it must develop the land with between 1,100 and 1,800 units, or find a viable alternative.

San Francisco-based Tai and Associates has been closely following the debate, and has offered the city a carrot in the form of a 50 percent affordable-housing dedication — well above what is legally required — to allow the project. No specific project plans or commitments have been received by the city, Planning Director Maureen Owens said.

Complicating the city's efforts to adopt the long-overdue General Plan — it's been on the table for eight years — is the failure of the plan's companion EIR, which also remains uncertified, to address the impacts development would have on the environmentally sensitive slough system on the land. The omission could land the city in a legal battle over non-compliance

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with state environmental laws.

The council rejected another offer from Tai, to pay the legal fees incurred if the city, opting to pursue development of Lee Road with the existing General Plan EIR, were challenged in court.

Councilman Todd McFarren, who along with Councilmen Oscar Rios and Vice Mayor Parr Eves have tried to keep Lee Road apart from the other potential urbanization areas, cast one of the three dissenting votes, soundly rejected any of Tai's offers, warning, "I fear we are being hoodwinked by an out-of-town developer that eats councils like us for breakfast."

Last night's discussion was almost aborted early on by Eves, who raised a procedural challenge. The council, he said, had voted last Nov. 30 to set aside the Lee Road matter and focus on the long-overdue certification of the General Plan and EIR. He said a February newspaper notice announcing an upcoming discussion of the General Plan, not Lee Road, had interfered with appropriate public attendance at the meeting.

Support from McFarren, however, failed to sway the rest of the council toward continuing the matter until certification of the General Plan/EIR.

The council vote was preceded by a now familiar succession of voices for and against developing in the wetlands area.

Clay Kampf, representing the Santa Cruz Bird Club, led off, say-

ing the council should exclude Lee Road and "get on with the General Plan, and not waste any more city money." He cautioned that accepting Tai's money "muddies" the entire issue.

Christine Johnson-Lyons, of the Watsonville Wetlands Watch, called the wetlands "a regional treasure" that promised financial benefits for the area in years to come. Noting that a slough water-quality study has been launched by the Association of Monterey Bay Area Governments, Lyons asked, "What's the point of spending city money on (a supplemental EIR) when there's a study being done, initiated by the city... that will provide a detailed overview of the area?"

Mark Silberstien, director of the Elkhorn Slough National Estuarine Research Reserve, warned of "unseen consequences of piecemeal development" of sensitive habitats. Working with the Elkhorn reserve had taught him "an expensive lesson," he said, in that "we are now trying to rectify downstream consequences of things that were decided before a comprehensive plan was in place."

On the other side of the argument, Ed Moncrief, executive director of the Community Housing Improvement Systems and Planning Association (CHISPA), said authorizing a supplemental EIR would prove that the city "was thinking about the future." Acknowledging the importance of preserving the environment, Moncrief stressed that people were the priority natural resource, and that the area's need for affordable housing was critical.

It had also been pointed out to the council by Watsonville resident Dick Bernard that the Pajaro Valley Affordable Housing Corp., of which his wife, Kathy, is executive director, voted against supporting the Tai project. "With two (local affordable-housing) projects completed and five to seven more in the works," he said, developing west of Lee Road is not necessary.

Jim Van Houten, who will oversee the AMBAG slough study, supported the option in which Tai would pay for and submit a specific plan and EIR for Lee Road development. "(Tai can plan and propose anything they want to, but let them pay for it," he said.

Van Houten also doubted that Tai could come through on their promise of 50 percent affordable housing.

A Tai representative, Steve Hixon, urged the council to waste no more time with another EIR, but to accept his company's offer

to pay legal costs and proceed with the existing General Plan/EIR. He said the question of whether the EIR was adequate was "a subtle technicality of (California Environmental Quality Act) procedure."