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Expert testifies new bridge would endanger fishlife

Bridges

Construction of the new Little John Bridge over Soquel Creek on Old San Jose Road could have a bad effect on fish life in the creek, according to testimony in Superior Court last week.

William Denton, who lives at 4703 Old San Jose Road, is seeking a court order to halt the project until an environmental impact review takes place.

The County of Santa Cruz, which is defendant in the proceedings, claims that environmental impact of the Little John Bridge has already been considered.

Joseph Melino, San Jose attorney who is representing Denton, introduced as an expert witness Edward Arens, associate of the Environmental Impact Planning Corporation in San Francisco.

Arens, a forestry expert, has a PHD degree from the University of Edinburgh, Scotland.

The youthful Arens, whom Melino addressed as "Doctor," said that in preparing environmental impact reports, his firm considers both natural and sociological consequences. He devoted most of his testimony to the former.

First among the impacts he mentioned was the cutting of 38 redwood trees approximately 100 feet tall.

Arens said that replacing the 100-foot redwoods with 40 seedlings, as called for in Department of Public Works plans, is "not equal."

The loss of the trees would be important because of the "visual impact," because the trees muffle sounds of traffic for nearby homeowners, and because of increased siltation, Arens said.

"It will take more than 70 years for the trees being planted to grow to the size of these trees," Arens said.

The seedlings will not grow as fast as the trees on the site, which are from stump sprouts, he added.

Siltation of the creek will have "numerous" effects on the fish in Soquel Creek, all of them bad, Arens said.

He reported that the stream has a great number of steelhead trout, which spawn in it adjacent to the Little John Bridge, and also some silver salmon.

The cut to be made for the new bridge will be located on a flood plain, and the fill area will extend into the streambed, Arens asserted. He noted that specifications call for 10,000 cubic yards of fill on a 2-1 slope.

"There will be a lot of runoff," he predicted.

According to the forestry expert, if silt flows into the stream, it will deposit out on top of the gravel bed the fish need for spawning, cementing the gravel together.

"If the fish lay eggs and the silt comes down on them, it will smother them," Arens said. "It can also smother young fish. Also, many invertebrates live in the gravel, that serve as food for both fry and adult fish."

Siltation might reduce the light penetration, cutting down on algae growth, thus reducing the number of invertebrates living on the algae and consequently the number of fish, the witness said.

Or, siltation caused by rainwater running over the hydromulch the county proposes to put over the fill could increase the nutrients in the water, causing eutrophication, he added.

Eutrophication occurs when nutrients make possible larger growths than normal of algae, which use up all the oxygen in the water, causing a fish kill.

Another expert witness introduced by the petitioner, was Steven Sassoon of Carmel Valley, a civil engineer with an office in Monterey.

Sassoon said that alternative methods could be used to build the bridge that would have a lesser impact on the environment.

The Environmental Quality Act requires that alternatives to proposed construction projects be considered.

At least one of the alternatives would cost no more than the $240,000 low bid accepted for the Little John Bridge Project, Sassoon said.

He drew a diagram on the blackborad to show how the existing bridge might be replaced by a new, wider bridge on the same alignment and the same right of way, with support from additional piers and griders.

"If this was done, there would be no major fill, no change in bridge alignment, no trees need be cut, and there would be less siltation to the creek," Sassoon maintained.

Another alternative would be a longer bridge on the same alignment, constructed without the use of fill. This alternative would cost approximately $50,000 more than the proposed bridge, but would not require cutting as many trees, he added.

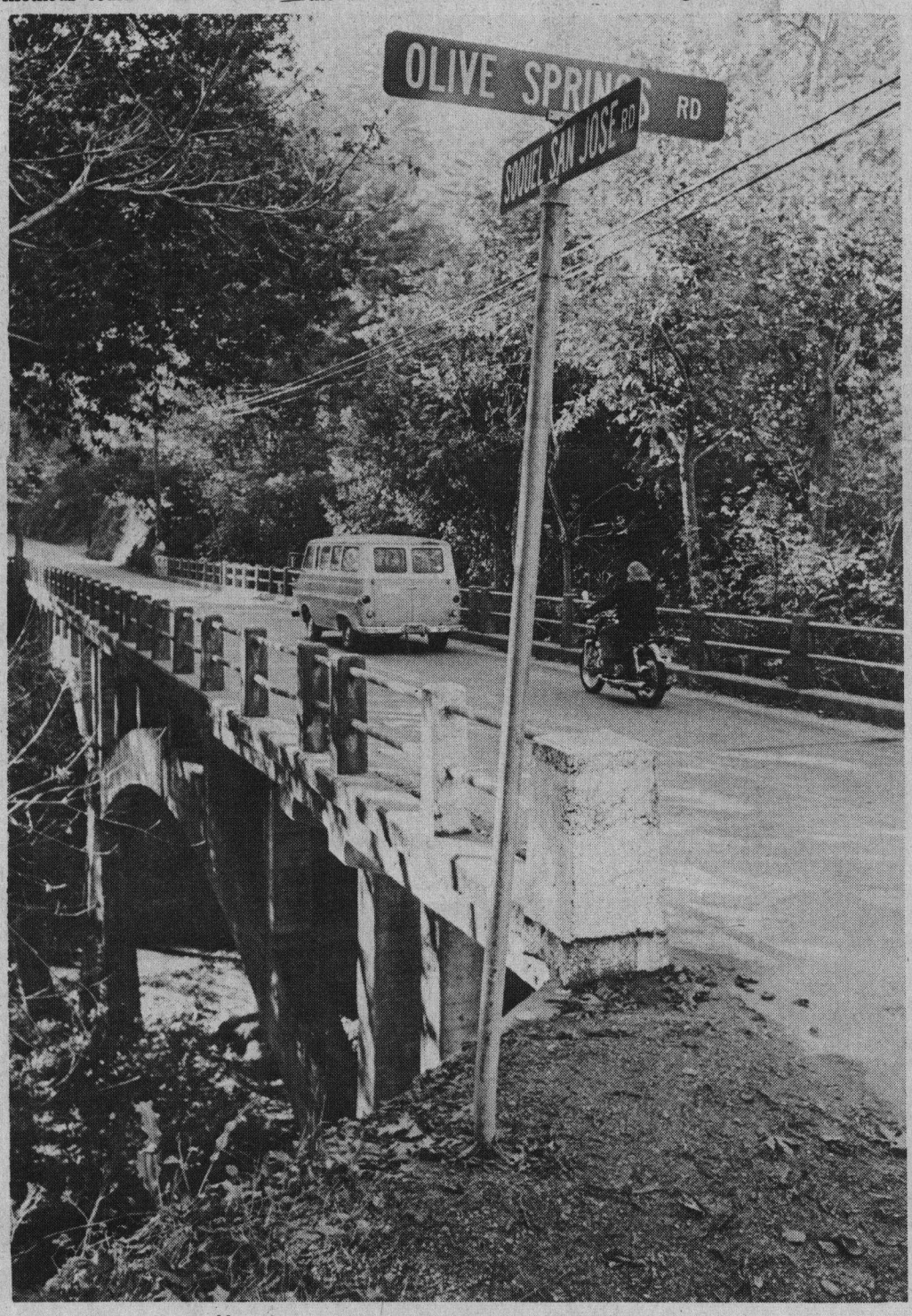
Sassoon said neither alternative would make the bridge unuseable during the construction period.

However, Judge Charles S. Franich commented, "The Environmental Quality Act goes beyond that. It says that even if something is appropriate under the regulations, if something better can be done to save the environment, it should be."

The trial was scheduled to be continued at 1:30 p.m. yesterday (Wednesday). Melino said he had one more witness for the petitioner.

A temporary restraining order has been issued by Franich to hold up construction of the Little John Bridge pending the completion of the court hearing.

Granite Construction Co. had been scheduled to start building the bridge Nov. 15.



Here's one span that's getting a lot of attention.