

County planners endorse larger Wingspread plan

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The larger of two proposals to develop the Wingspread Beach conference center on 72 acres of oceanfront property known as Porter Sesnon won tentative approval last week from the Santa Cruz County Planning Commission.

The commission gave Plan B "approval in concept," after rejecting Plan A, the smaller of the two proposals submitted by Conference Associates, a division of Hare, Brewer and Kelley, a Palo Alto development firm.

The decision, made during a tense, four-hour meeting, followed several lengthy, emotional hearings on plans to develop the scenic stretch bordering New Brighton State Beach.

The commission had delayed voting on Plan A, submitted earlier in the year, so it could compare the second proposal, Plan B.

Plan A, which gained little public support, had called for 197 condominiums, a conference center, tennis courts, public parking and access to the beach.

Plan B calls for 295 condominiums, which could be divided into as many as 585 rentals, a conference center, three performing arts halls, a restaurant, shops, public parking and access to the beach, and three public playing fields.

The larger plan has won enthusiastic backing from cultural and sports groups who plan to manage the recreational and performing arts facilities through special contracts with the developers.

Another broad group of people, including environmentalists, residents who live near the planned development and others, have opposed both projects, preferring to see the property absorbed into the state park system.

The most eloquent advocate of that point of view among the planning commissioners last week was Commissioner Denise Holbert. Holbert said the process of evaluating the Wingspread proposals reminded her of the television game show, "Let's Make a Deal."

"Do you want what's behind

the green curtain, Plan A?" Holbert said, "Or what's behind the box, Plan B?"

She accused Conference Associates of submitting the "mediocre, uninspired" Plan A to make sure that anything that followed would look good in comparison.

"I'm not interested in 'Let's Make a Deal,'" Holbert said. "Each project should stand on its own merits. Plan A is nothing but a ploy to scare folks into believing if Plan B is not approved Plan A will be."

Holbert said that hours of testimony have made it clear that Plan A does not meet the

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best interests of the county, nor does it comply with the Local Coastal Plan (LCP). It's probably not even economically viable, Holbert said.

Plan A would be a poor use for one of the last open coastal spaces in Santa Cruz County, Holbert said.

"It just doesn't make sense," she said. "It doesn't make environmental sense. It doesn't make dollars and cents sense."

Commissioner Ree Burnap and Myrna Britton voted with Holbert to deny Plan A. They denied the smaller plan on the basis of planning staff findings that said, among other things, that Plan A failed to meet the county code and the LCP.

Among the provisions of the LCP that are violated by Plan A is the limit on the number of visitor-serving units to be allowed on the property. The LCP limit is 130 such units. Plan A calls for 197.

Commissioners Dale Skillicorn and I.H. Eberly voted against a flat denial of Plan A. They favored denying Plan A "without prejudice." Such a move would allow the commission to consider Plan A again, if Plan B failed.

Britton objected to such a move because she said it would give special treatment to Conference Associates. She said,

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"This really does sound like 'Let's Make a Deal,' because it does sound like 'if you can't have one, you can have another.'"

Once the commissioners disposed of Plan A, they turned their attention to Plan B.

Plan B, like Plan A, would require lifting LCP limits on visitor units.

Holbert objected to tampering with the LCP.

"Everytime we run up against something we don't like," she said, "We just change the LCP to make it consistent with that."

The commissioners spent hours discussing details of the design and location of the performing arts center and public walkways. They questioned assumptions of the traffic study, which concluded Plan B would not disturb traffic flow. Traffic mitigations might even improve current conditions, county planner Tom Burns said.

"It's just hard to believe you can have 6,000 more cars out there, even with signals and mitigations, and say it's going to be better," Holbert said. "Do you believe in the Easter Bunny?"

The traffic study assumes the performing arts center and other Wingspread facilities will be managed so they will not generate traffic at the peak times of 6 to 8 a.m. and 4 to 6 p.m.

Commissioners Holbert and Britton pointed out that the study did not consider the rush

to night classes at Cabrillo College, nor did it consider traffic conditions that would exist once Seascapes has been fully developed. They also faulted the study for not including a "worst case" analysis of what would happen if it became impossible to manage traffic created by Wingspread.

In the end, Burnap proposed approving in concept a modified Wingspread Plan B. But her list of modifications was long and extensive.

The list included:

—Reducing the density of the development to reduce traffic impact and parking needs. The lower density would also lower the need for multi-story buildings.

—Adopting a development agreement suggested by staff that requires Conference Associates to give the county \$1.3 million in transient occupancy tax or in lieu payments. The agreement would allow the county to increase the amount in relation to increases in the tax.

—Moving the performing arts center away from the railroad tracks to the southeast side of the property, a quieter, less visible spot that would require less grading.

—Moving Seal Lodge 50 feet from the tree canopy.

—Limiting building heights to 35 feet, except for the performing arts center.

—Redesigning the public walkway so people won't have to walk under the railroad tracts.

"This is going to require some of the most extensive redesign that's ever been proposed," Eberly said. "I don't

think all of them are necessary."

But, he said, he'd support the move to pass the project to the Board of Supervisors as soon as possible. Skillicorn also supported the motion.

Britton and Holbert voted no.

Holbert said, "I think this project is totally outrageous. I think the developer has been very successful in pitting the environmental interests against the cultural and sports interests. I think it's been a very sad and divisive thing. I think he's (developer Ryland Kelley) been very successful in obscuring the whole problem here, which is the land-use issue. It (Plan B) doesn't conform to the coastal plan, the general plan. Where it doesn't comply, we're asked to change the rules to fit the project."

She accused the "special interests" favoring the project of showing little concern for the neighbors of the Porter Sesnon property.

Burnap responded by stressing the benefits of Plan B. She said they include improved public access to the beach, and additional public and private recreational facilities at no cost to the county. In addition, the county stands to receive \$1.3 million a year in taxes from Wingspread, she noted.

"I regard this as a benefit in many, many ways and that's why I support it," Burnap said.

The commission instructed the planning staff to draw up the suggested modifications and conditions in conjunction with Conference Associates and submit them to the commission on Dec. 4.