

Water overdraft clouds future of huge project

By CAROLYN
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The Santa Cruz County Planning Commission agreed by unanimous vote Wednesday night to direct another investigation into possible county acquisition of the O'Neill Ranch site in Soquel for use as a regional community center and park.

The motion was a victory of sorts for the members of Save Soquel and Advocates for Community Recreation Expansion (ACRE) organizations, who had crowded the auditorium of the old County Hospital building for the second in a series of public hearings.

All but one of the speakers during the public session urged denial of the proposed 490-unit development proposal of the H.C. Perry Company on the 100-acre site behind Soquel High School.

Sole supporter of the project was Kent Washburn, attorney for the H.C. Perry Co., who said he was "fascinated by this growth of an illusion that a park is possible." The attorney argued that there is less state funding available to assist in the development of park projects, and new attempts to acquire such assistance has little chance of success.

The commission directed planning staff to work with Save Soquel and ACRE and the County Parks, Open Space and Cultural Services Department to research available grant sources, such as the Roberti Z'Berg program.

Judy Parsons, representative of ACRE and Save Soquel, said the organizations will gladly provide assistance.

"This is the first time any government agency has come to us to offer support," she said.

Even though the commission agreed to initiate research on the possibility of acquisition, there has yet been no decision on the O'Neill Ranch development proposal. Commissioners will take no action until after the next hearing July 16 at Soquel High School.

It now appears, however, that the potential supply problems of the Soquel Creek County Water District may influence the commission's position toward new developments proposed within the service district. It was announced that earlier in the day, two Aptos project applications, Woodside Terrace near Cabrillo College and the Village Glen development proposed for Aptos Village, were denied without prejudice — partly because there is a need for clarification about the water overdraft situation.

Commissioners and the public both said they have questions about the water problem they wish to address to Soquel Creek County Water District and the Santa Cruz City Water Department, but neither organization sent representatives to the meeting.

The O'Neill Ranch sits on the boundary line between the

two water agencies, and will directly affect the projected groundwater overdraft increases of the Soquel District.

Some of the alternatives to the groundwater overdraft problem are to develop a sub-surface collector system for Aptos and Soquel creeks; the purchase of "surplus" water from the Santa Cruz City Water Department; and construction of the Glenwood Dam on the west branch of Soquel Creek.

The commission stated that it now wants to know if there will be water before it gives approval to development proposals, and is asking for greater specifics about the possible options.

Commissioners each discussed their opinions about the proposed development for the O'Neill Ranch, and all mentioned the water problem as a key issue in their considerations.

Commissioner Chuck Rowe said information about available water must be known before the commission makes a decision.

"I think we will regroup and take a position instead of giving tentative approval to any number of developments as we did in the past," he said.

Commissioner Celia Von der Muhl said the commission can no longer ignore potential supply problems. There is no real assurance that this resource is available, she added, yet in the meantime, she has counted some 3,700

dwelling units that have been approved for the midcounty area, excluding the City of Capitola, single-family homes, recreational or commercial-industrial developments.

Alternate commissioner Ken Call agreed water may be the key issue for the O'Neill Ranch development.

"It may very well be this issue that stops the project, if anything does," he said.

All the commissioners indicated they had been impressed and influenced by the appeals and statements made during the hearings by the Soquel community.

"But I'm appalled," said Chairman D.W. Gotthold, "that no one is here to defend the project."

He was assured by Washburn that H.C. Perry and Co. is preparing a response to both the comment of the commissioners and the public.

The commission made it clear it is not yet prepared to make a decision, and only Mrs. Von der Muhl actually took a stand on the development proposal.

"I haven't heard anything yet that would convince me to vote in favor of it," she said.

She noted the proposed 41st Avenue extension, the anticipated school overload, the project's density and traffic as some of the reasons she leans against the development.

"It is also a particular piece of land that is basic to Soquel," she said. "It should be protected to the greatest extent possible, perhaps with the exception of the recreational development in the portion of land nearest the road."

Speakers during the public hearing included a number of Soquel residents who had been active when the Soquel General Plan was drafted in 1973.

Bob Petersen served on the general plan's citizen advisory committee, and was then appointed to the County Planning Commission for four years. He argued that the site was less than ideal for the proposed density.

In response to a statement by Call about fair share growth in Soquel, Peterson said, "I think the land will tell us how much to put on it and what kind of constraints there must be for development."

REFERENCE

~~7205 SOQUEL DRIVE~~
~~APTOS, CALIF.~~

GREEN SHEET
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Elsie Forhan, a Little Creek Road resident, had also served on the general plan's citizen advisory group. She said in the last phases of the plan, the work of the group was "overthrown," by others who changed the plan with amendments.

"I want you to know those who worked on it favored much less density than what shows on the plan," she said.

She also argued that development plans for low-income housing are used as an excuse for high density construction. Advocates for growth favor low-income housing because it allows the higher density, she said, and the issue is being used to disarm those who support slow-growth. It is for this reason, she added, that she has become disenchanted with Measure J.

Mrs. Forhan also charged that developers are planning to bring in out-of-county construction workers for the project.

"I've never been in favor of heavy growth here," she said. "But local workers shouldn't be squeezed out of their available income."

Rock Pfothenhauer, a member of the County Parks, Recreation, Open Space and Cultural Services Commission, was the speaker who lobbied the most successfully for the re-investigation of funding sources for the community center proposal on the site.

The O'Neill Ranch site, he said, may be the only one left that is suitable for a park and community center, particularly since the Granite Rock property in Live Oak was deemed inappropriate.

"There are ways it could be funded," he said. "There are grants such as the Roberti Z'Berg program or water conservation grants. There could be a Joint Powers Authority formed with the school district. Private grants are also possible."

He added that the county could also investigate its own sources — including the potential of the Granite Rock property to provide some funding.

"Before you decide against it, we should make the very best efforts to acquire the property," Pfothenhauer said. "Up until now, we haven't done that."