

# District eyes a new water supply

## Soquel-San Jose Road parcel one option under consideration

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**SOQUEL** — The Soquel Creek Water District is quietly working on the possibility of developing an additional water supply by buying 32 acres along Soquel-San Jose Road to create a holding pond.

Though district officials say that is only one of six options a 25-member citizens advisory group is studying, the board of directors has been negotiating to buy the property, which adjoins Soquel Creek, lush forests and steep hills.

The board has held closed sessions to negotiate a purchase price, estimated to be at least \$1.8 million based on the sale price of an adjacent parcel, according to an attorney for the property owners.

"Please make it real clear it isn't a done deal, but when the property became available we wanted to secure it because we can't just get any property along the creek," said Laura Brown, the district's general manager.

"Over the years there were several sites we investigated and dismissed. Of the undeveloped parcels, this would be the most viable because a diversion (from the creek) is closest here and from an environmental point it's the best."

Developing the proposed pond would supply just 1 percent of the district's overall water needs at an initial cost of more than \$17 million, but district officials say that finding any new water supply is an expensive proposition.

In March 1996, the district obtained an op-



Dan Coyro/Sentinel

The Soquel Creek Water District may buy this 32-acre site off Soquel-San Jose Road to create a holding pond that would increase water stores.

tion to buy the land from the Leporini family, which has owned it since the 1920s. It is zoned agricultural and has been used to grow apples and persimmons.

The property is between Soquel-San Jose Road and Soquel Creek in a canyon-like area where fields and crops are tucked in along the

creek.

The owners aren't enthusiastic about selling, said family attorney James Ritchey, but state eminent domain law allows a public agency to take property for public purposes, a

Please see **WATER DISTRICT** — BACK PAGE



# Water district

Continued from Page A1

process often known as condemnation. Ritchey said the property would be worth much more in five years.

"We've granted four or five extensions to the district's buy option ... and now we are negotiating a purchase price," he said. "And it's my understanding that they are in the process of moving forward to purchase."

The current purchase option expires in March.

Ritchey said he has received offers from others to buy the property, including a farmer who recently bought five acres nearby for \$300,000. He said he wants the district to pay about \$60,000 an acre.

"We would prefer not to sell until the district has definitely decided to proceed with their project," said Ritchey, a Santa Cruz lawyer who formerly worked

as an assistant county counsel specializing in condemnation proceedings. "But I recognize the right of a public agency."

One frequent board critic said she thinks the board should consider options before moving ahead with the holding-pond idea, which, including the cost of a water-treatment plant, would cost about \$17.5 million.

"I get the feeling the district has already made up its mind ... and that's why they are holding the option on the property," said Barbara Graves, whose husband ran unsuccessfully for a seat on the district board last year. "I'm not totally against the argument the project may be needed. I haven't made up my mind on what the best solution would be but I have decided that we haven't looked at everything."

Brown said a study showed the site could be used effectively but the board

has not made a decision on whether to move ahead.

"We conducted the study back then because we didn't want to have an option to buy property we would not be able to utilize," she said.

The board is looking at water-supply options because studies show that it cannot continue to pump groundwater at current rates indefinitely.

Its 45,000 customers use about 5,480 acre feet of water annually. The district estimates demand will increase to 6,000 acre feet by 2001 and 6,400 in 2006. The district pulls two-thirds of its water from the Purisima aquifer and another third from the Aromas Red Sands aquifer through 17 wells scattered between La Selva Beach and Capitola.

Ninety percent of district customers are residential and the average hookup uses about 400 gallons a day of water. One acre foot equals 325,829 gallons.

The holding pond would contain about 50 acre feet. The water would be diverted in the winter and remain stored for the dry summer months, al-

lowing time for the solids to settle, so it could be treated and used for drinking water.

The Public Advisory Committee was formed in 1997, composed of 25 people who represent homeowners, business, environmental groups and government agencies. It reviews projects and makes recommendations to the board about water supply needs.

So far, the committee has identified seven options for the future, including conservation, a plant to treat seawater, wastewater recycling, purchases from other water agencies, and a dam elsewhere on Soquel Creek.

"The committee is still exploring the options right now and we haven't gotten to the point of packaging yet," Brown said.

She said the district has set aside some money for the various projects but exact costs aren't known.

"The biggest expense would be getting a new supply but we won't have a huge rate increase and we have been planning ahead," she said.