

Wingspread Beach

If at First You Don't Succeed...

by Jim Tappe

Despite a number of setbacks over the past year, Conference Associates, a subsidiary of the Palo Alto firm Hare, Brewer, and Kelley (HB&K), has persisted in its efforts to build a Wingspread Beach condominium and cultural center on the Porter-Sesnon property in Aptos. The 67-acre meadow is one of the last undeveloped areas on the central coast.

The University of California Regents leased the land to the developers for 99 years in 1978. In the past, zoning restrictions and an environmental impact report have deterred the developers from constructing the project.

Now, in their latest attempt to open the way for development, the Palo Alto firm has offered the community a trade-off. It will build a performing arts center free of charge, if the county allows it to build 295 condominiums and a conference center on the property. Currently, the local coastal program (LCP) limits the number of units that may be built on the land to 130. The Santa Cruz County Board of Supervisors would have to amend the program they approved in 1981 to allow the additional units.

In their effort to gain local support for the project, the developers have not only offered the community the performing arts center but also \$500,000 annually to operate the theaters. The money, which would be derived from eight percent of the project's gross condominium rental revenue, would be turned over to the Wingspread Arts Foundation, a committee formed by HB&K to operate and own the facility. The committee, whose members HB&K appointed, consists of 14 local people and developer Rye Kelley. Also in the package deal is an additional seven acres the developers will donate to the community for sports fields.

The developers made their trade-off known to the community in a recent direct mail campaign. The literature urged citizens to help HB&K persuade the Board of Supervisors, who in the past have opposed the project, to amend the LCP. The developers have already gained the support of many sports and performing arts groups. "Clearly, this sports-art project is in the best interest of the county," said E.T. "Bud" Kretschmer, past president of the Santa Cruz Symphony and the Cabrillo Music Festival. Kretschmer serves as president of the Wingspread Arts Foundation. Other members include UCSC Vice Chancellor of University Relations Colette Seiple.

If the supervisors do not amend the LCP, the developers will propose a scaled-down version of Wingspread consisting of 197 units. The supervisors' approval is also needed before construction begins. The county planning department has determined the 197-unit project to be consistent with the LCP's limit of 130 housing units, because the developers have purchased an additional six acres of land adjacent to the Porter-Sesnon property.



The Porter-Sesnon property in Aptos, site of the proposed Wingspread Beach project.

Vicky Powell, spokesperson for the Friends of Porter-Sesnon (FOPS), a coalition of 4,000 Aptos and Capitola neighbors opposing the development, is skeptical of the developers' offer. "I think that the community at large needs to question and be aware of the developers giving us a gift of a performing arts center, sports facilities, and baskets of money to operate the facility with no strings attached."

Powell said she believes Rye Kelley has ulterior motives in offering the performing arts center and sports fields. "I think he is using our community to start out with his development of 295 units to eventually build all he wants to build." Originally, the developers proposed to build 630 condominiums, a convention center, and a performing arts center. The supervisors, however, adopted zoning restrictions that limited the number of housing units to 130.

FOPS opposes Wingspread because its members believe the project will increase traffic congestion and have several adverse impacts on the property. An environmental impact report completed last April on the 630 unit project stated that Wingspread "will have a potentially significant adverse impact on site geologic conditions, current noise levels, surrounding neighborhood characteristics, [and] storm surface drainage". The EIR estimated that the number of vehicle trips per day could increase from the allowed maximum of 1300 to up to 7,360 per day to the project.

Among the documented areas of impact are some overlooked by the EIR. The massive soil excavation required to build Wingspread, for example, had not been studied in the EIR.

"We choose to live in Santa Cruz County because it's unlike San Jose with its traffic congestion and urban sprawl; if we allow Wingspread to be built we are permanently opening the door to widespread commercial development," said Powell. FOPS agrees with the LCP that the land would be best used as an addition to the New Brighton Beach State Park.

According to Powell, HB&K used similar tactics on its Pajaro Dunes project in Watsonville in the late 1960s. The project was planned to be only 150 units, but eventually grew to 600 units once restrictions were lifted. Powell fears that if the anti-Wingspread majority on the board of supervisors is ousted in next June's elections, the LCP will be amended to allow the entire 630 unit project to be built.

Robley Levy and Joe Cuicharra, who in the past have opposed the project, are up for re-election. Levy, whose district includes the Porter-Sesnon property, is regarded by many political observers to be the swing vote in the issue. It remains to be seen whether Wingspread Beach will become a major campaign issue, but if it does, Levy in particular could either gain or lose voter support depending on her decision.

"The major issues to me with respect to any proposal or private development are to assure public access, to be environmentally sound, to provide all mitigation of traffic impacts and to provide public benefits," said Levy. The county environmental coordinator has determined that the first EIR is adequate for the 197 unit project. However, a "focused" EIR will be needed for the 295 unit project.

Although the results of the first EIR were generally negative, three positive impacts were cited. According to the report, "the project would provide cultural and conventional facilities to a degree presently unavailable within Santa Cruz County." The EIR estimates Wingspread would create 350-400 jobs and generate \$1.6 million in tax revenues.

According to Tim Welch, spokesperson for Conference Associates, the 295 unit project would provide a minimum of \$1.2 million dollars annually in tax revenues and 250 jobs for local people.

Despite the tax revenue increases, Supervisor Gary Patton believes "taxes are not the key issue in terms of land use. I don't think you make decisions on land use in order to generate revenues. The question is what is the best use of the land, not what would produce the most tax money."

Patton also believes the project would not benefit the city of Santa Cruz because of its location. "I have always felt that the proper place to put a facility to attract visitors from out of the country is in an area where an infrastructure is already there, instead of out on a freeway interchange, in the middle of nowhere," said Patton. "To me it seems logical to locate the facility in the city of Santa Cruz since the city is the major tourist attraction in the county." At the proposed location, said Patton, local businesses would not be able to profit from the tourist's patronage.

Patton believes the property should become an addition to the adjacent state park. The state Parks and Recreation Commission has offered the developers \$4 million for the property. Although Conference Associates paid only \$1.75 million to lease the property from the UC Regents, Welch said that the offer was inadequate. "We would not sell it [the property] to the state for \$4 million. Our own appraisals [of the property's value] are significantly higher," said Welch.

The UC Regents originally acquired the land in 1972 when the Porter-Sesnon families donated the land. Then in 1978, in a controversial transaction, the Regents leased the property to Conference Associates before the state could appropriate the money for its purchase. Two years later, Conference Associates announced its plans to build a 630-unit condominium and cultural center. Shortly after, the Friends of Porter-Sesnon formed to oppose the development and to seek designation of Porter-Sesnon as an open area or as an addition to the State Parks system. In 1981, the board of supervisors adopted the local coastal plan along with its zoning restrictions. Last April, the environmental impact report was completed. Three months later, the developers submitted the 197-unit project to the county planning department, where it has remained until now. County Planner Mark Demming estimates the planning process will be completed in January. The planning commission will hold a public hearing to discuss the results of the analysis. Final approval, however, depends on the supervisors' decision sometime next month.

Photo by HOLGER LEUE