

Butterfly site gets limits on development

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CAPITOLA — The first step has been taken in the possible development of three single-family homes in a Monarch butterfly wintering site along the cliffs of Depot Hill.

However, the City Council on Thursday night — while it certified the final environmental-impact report for the 1.3-acre site — expressed concerns about the project itself and also made overtures about the city buying the property to preserve as open space.

The site is situated at the end of Escalona Drive, adjacent to El Salto Resort. The city failed in an attempt to buy the property in 1976 when voters rejected a bond issue.

Certification of the environmental-impact report essentially says that development could take place without creating a significant impact on the environment.

Complicating matters is the fact the site is an environmentally sensitive Monarch butterfly wintering site, with approximately 32,000 butterflies migrating there each winter.

But environmental-impact report consultant Stephanie Strewlow told council members in no uncertain terms that “the (butterfly) habitat will be protected.”

For instance, the EIR recommends that no construction be allowed between October and February when the majority of Monarchs live on the site. No so-called “cluster area trees,” which provide much of the wind protection for the Monarchs, would be lost. However, 50 trees overall would be cut down (32 of which are under 12-inch trunk diameter). Strewlow said fireplaces could also be prohibited in the three homes because Monarchs are sensitive to smoke.

Planning Director Susan Tupper reminded council members that all the above conditions would be addressed if and when the actual development application comes before the city. She noted that, technically, there are five developable lots, but the EIR only addressed building on three.

The council’s action simply allows applicant Robert Blodgett to move forward on his proposed project, said Tupper, who added that a “long (planning) process remains. That process includes a General Plan and rezoning change since the property is currently zoned for parks and open space.

Five residents of the area objected to the proposal, primarily citing concern for the butterflies. But Councilman Michael Routh said neighbors would want to see the property remain in open space “whether or not the butterflies were there.”

Several council members expressed a desire for the city to buy the property to retain as open space. However, Councilman Ron Graves felt that it would be too expensive for the city to buy.