

Changes may bolster Arana Gulch path plan

Two who voted against SC project replaced, but forecasting vote difficult

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SANTA CRUZ — The California Coastal Commission is undergoing an extreme makeover, with the changes potentially giving the Arana Gulch plan a boost and holding future implications for two major issues in Santa Cruz: the proposed desalination plant and the beachfront La Bahia Hotel.

In the past few weeks, Gov. Jerry Brown and state lawmakers have appointed several new commissioners, including a former Ventura mayor and the first member from Del Norte County. While they haven't yet met as a group, the new members' collective track records are solidly pro-environmental.

But it is who they replaced that has backers of Arana Gulch quietly optimistic. Two members who voted against the project are gone, replaced by television producer Dayna Bochco and Marin County Supervisor Steve Kinsey.

"This is a big step forward," said Paul Schoellhamer, a local supporter of the project. "We wanted strong enviros who would make decisions based on the facts and the law, not on ideology or interest group politics. It appears we got what we wanted."

"We're hoping they're more appreciative of a project

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that we think is consistent with their mandate and their values," Santa Cruz Mayor Ryan Coonerty said.

The plan, which includes bicycle and pedestrian trails through a 68-acre greenbelt behind the Santa Cruz Small Craft Harbor, was rejected in October on a 5-5 vote.

Observers on both sides of the issue agree that a late-arriving commissioner who was not allowed to vote would have tilted the project to approval.

Planners are tweaking the project, but it appears they wouldn't need much more to get it through the Coastal Commission. But jettisoning Commissioner Sara Wan is a major change.

Wan, a strong environmentalist who voted against the proposal, built a reputation over 15 years on the commission as a staunch defender of the coast and strict interpreter of coastal rules.

Another change is the departure of San Francisco Supervisor Ross Mirkarimi, who also voted against Arana Gulch. He was the first Green Party member on the Coastal Commission, but was also replaced.

Wan consistently ranked at or near the top of commissioner vote rankings put together by an environmental coalition of the Sierra Club, Surfrider Foundation, California Coastkeeper Alliance and others. She viewed the proposed Arana Gulch plan as part of a broader transportation project rather than one meant to help interpret the region's natu-

ral environment.

Wan has also voted against desalination proposals, which could be a factor if the Santa Cruz Water Department and Soquel Creek Water District eventually seek Coastal Commission approval for their proposed desal plant. Another major local issue is the proposed La Bahia Hotel project, which has been filed and will require commission approval. No votes on Arana Gulch, La Bahia or the desal plant have been scheduled.

The 12-member Coastal Commission has broad authority over development along California's 1,100-mile coastline, including much of the prime real estate in Santa Cruz County. Other new members include Del Norte County Supervisor Martha McClure, former Ventura Mayor Brian Brennan and Jana Zimmer, a Santa Barbara artist.

Some environmentalists working to tweak the Arana Gulch proposal were disappointed Wan is gone. Vince Cheap, a local chapter president of the California Native Plant Society, said that despite his group's concessions, talks with the city of Santa Cruz over Arana Gulch recently broke down due to the city's refusal to commit to ongoing funding or scientific standards for assessing the vitality of the endangered Santa Cruz tarplant.

"(Wan) was more extreme than we were, in a sense," Cheap said.

Dannette Shoemaker, Santa Cruz's director of parks and recreation, said she was surprised to learn tarplant advocates felt talks had broken down, but added that the city cannot commit to annual funding of a plant management plan.

Wan was replaced by Bochco, who currently serves on the boards of Heal the

Bay and a Southern California chapter of the Natural Resources Defense Council.

She has not yet met officially as a member of the commission, and it's too soon to say whether she represents a significant break from Wan on issues, or how the new members change the makeup of the group.

"I don't have any experience with the new commissioners, so I have no idea," said Santa Cruz County Supervisor Mark Stone, a Coastal Commission member who voted in favor of Arana Gulch.

Wan may have written her own end in January, when she successfully sought to be elected chair of the Coastal Commission.

The move angered California Democratic Party Chairman John Burton, who preferred a protege in the role, and state Senate President Pro Tem Darrell Steinberg declined to reappoint Wan when her term expired in March.

Reached at her home in Malibu, Wan was curt. She said she did not have a sense of how her departure would affect any future vote on Arana Gulch.

"No," she said. "I have none."

In a statement, Heal the Bay President Mark Gold praised Wan, calling her the best commissioner in the history of the Coastal Commission, and said Bochco has big shoes to fill.

Bochco said she was unfamiliar with Wan's record and has never met her, but said she would interpret every case according to the Coastal Act's intent.

"I don't think anyone should go in to any situation or any application with a prejudgment," Bochco said. "We're not there for that. We're there to analyze the facts, interpret them against the law, and act accordingly."