

County to study purchase of Wingspread site lease

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Santa Cruz County Supervisor E. Wayne Moore Jr. reversed his stand on government involvement with the proposed Wingspread development and cast the deciding vote yesterday for the county to look into buying the lease for the 66-acre Porter Sesnon property.

The county would then lease it back to the current leaseholder, developer Ryland Kelley.

Moore joined supervisors Dan Forbus and Robley Levy in voting for study of the purchase/lease arrangement. Joe Cucchiara and Gary Patton voted no.

Moore voted against a similar arrangement, dubbed Plan C, in February, and the board rejected the plan by a 3-2 vote.

Later in February, Wingspread Plan B, which calls for 467 condominium rental units, a performing arts center, and playing fields for sports on the beachfront property, was conditionally approved by the supervisors. That plan did not call for government participation in the hotly-debated development.

But County Administrative Officer George Newell resurrected the purchase/lease-back plan, stating that it was the best way to protect the property from annexation or incorpora-

tion into other jurisdictions, and that it provided the county with the most revenue.

Newell wrote in a report to the supervisors that a purchase/lease-back arrangement would produce county revenues from room tax and food and beverage sales. Without the purchase, county revenues would be limited to that from the room tax.

He said this change "will produce many millions of dollars more in income to the county than a room tax."

Moore said the reason he voted against such an arrangement in February was because he felt the county should not be involved in the day-to-day operations of Wingspread.

"I felt then, and still continue to feel that this is inappropriate," Moore said.

He added, "If this is viewed as a betrayal or a sell-out by the opponents of Wingspread, it is not that. It is simply delineating my convictions that the county should not be involved in the direct management of the facility."

Moore said when he voted for Wingspread Plan B, he knew that a development agreement between the county and the developers "might involve the county in some way in a leasehold agreement."

Moore commented, "More importantly, this board has directed the county administra-

tive officer at budget time and other times to always be on the alert for additional revenue for the county.

"At some point, we have to say as a community and as a board that we are going to do those things that are going to bring in those increased revenues to support social programs that all of us have been unified behind," Moore said.

Moore said the vote was especially timely because he had to attend a meeting last night with Watsonville day care center directors who were not included in the county's revenue-sharing funds.

His reversal, however, prompted heavy criticism from Cucchiara, a long-time opponent of Wingspread.

"In every discussion I had with you and in every comment you made in public hearings," Cucchiara said, "you were very clear about keeping county government money out of the hands of a private development project and not to put the county taxpayers at that kind of risk."

See WINGSPREAD page 2 ▶

► From page 1

He said, "This is nothing more than the CAO (Newell) coming back and saying, 'Let's do plan C anyway because three votes of this board don't count.' And the question is, is one member of the board going to stand by his vote."

But Moore responded that Cucchiara "should have put your bet somewhere else. To put it on the one candidate, who since 1980 has been an arch-supporter of Wingspread, was a mistake."

Moore said Cucchiara was "expressing the exasperation of fighting for a losing position. If you were on the losing end more often, you might understand some of the frustrations Dan Forbus and I have put up with for the last six years on this board."

Cucchiara also criticized another element of Newell's proposal — to try to secure state financial assistance for Wingspread.

This amounted to, he said, "getting in bed with a developer who cannot secure his own financial backing for this project."

Opponents of Wingspread in the audience joined in the criticism of that component of the plan.

Mitchell Page, attorney for Friends of Porter Sesnon, an organization opposed to private development of the property, said he thought one of the main reasons for the purchase/lease-back system was "that government participation with the developer will enable him to get some sort of financing — Coastal Conservancy funds or the like — so he can make this project, which is financially not feasible, more feasible."

Attorney Celia Scott Von Der Muhll, also with Friends of Porter Sesnon, called the plan "the most incredibly outrageous, disgraceful thing I ever heard of."

She also noted that first priority for revenues produced by Wingspread goes to areas inside

the county's urban services line, which excludes Cucchiara's Fifth District (San Lorenzo Valley) and the majority of Moore's Fourth District (South County).

Board Chairman Patton, a longtime foe of Wingspread, said he would be "ashamed" to approach state legislators for financial aid for the Wingspread project.

"How could we go to our state legislators with a straight face and ask them to finance a hotel?" he asked.

Another Wingspread opponent, Seacliff resident Greg Hudson, satirically chastised the board.

"I started out feeling very opposed to this project, but after listening (to board discussion), you really changed my mind," Hudson said. "If Mr. Kelley is going to be able to work this kind of deal with the county, I would like to be next in line to work out a similar deal."

Hudson said he was willing to sell his Seacliff property to the county if the county would "remove any density restrictions on that property."

He said, "I'd like to quadruple or quintuple the amount of units I could put on that property. Of course, this would work to the detriment of my neighbors, but since this board is willing to destroy an entire neighborhood, I can't imagine that the 10 or 12 neighbors around me would make any difference."

In addition, Hudson asked county officials to "go to the state and, just like you are going to do for Mr. Kelley, get a low-interest loan of taxpayer money so that I can build my development. Then after I've made a substantial profit in a few years, I'd like to move to a county that respects its general plan."

But supervisors Robley Levy and Dan Forbus joined Moore in approving Newell's proposal in its entirety.

Levy said she voted for the arrangement because it covered her concern to ensure the county has "an effective mechanism to protect the public benefits for the citizens of this county."

Forbus said the matter boils down to one issue — money.

"This arrangement multiplies the county's revenues for the project by two or three times," he said.

The board's action yesterday was only a conceptual one and many hurdles remain in front of an eventual purchase of the lease by the county. The action does authorize the county administrative office to begin negotiations with Hare, Brewer and Kelley over the lease, as well as to initiate discussions with the state about possible state participation in the development.