

Polo Grounds only snag in county parks plan

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SANTA CRUZ — County supervisors Tuesday approved an ambitious proposal for expansion of the county's park system amid indications that one part of the proposed expansion plan is in for some stiff opposition.

Approved by the board was a multifaceted proposal by Parks Director Ben Angove.

On Angove's recommendation, supervisors agreed to:

- Move "immediately" to purchase the 300-acre Quail Hollow Ranch from the Santa Clara County Office of Education, which has offered to sell the property to Santa Cruz County for \$1.15 million.

- Allocate funds for an appraisal of the Polo Grounds in Aptos, as a first step toward purchasing that 62-acre site for a combined neighborhood, community and regional park.

- Obtain an analysis comparing the costs of developing either a 25-meter or a 50-meter swimming pool and locker facilities on 17th Avenue in Live Oak.

- Authorize the Parks Department to begin a feasibility and cost study of a number of proposed improvements at north coast beaches.

No objections were raised to the Quail Hollow purchase, the Live Oak pool proposal or the north coast beach-improvement study Tuesday, but the Polo Grounds proposal drew opposition from a group that hopes to develop housing for senior citizens on the property.

The Polo Grounds has been described by Angove as "the only remaining large parcel in Aptos that could accommodate (a park)," and the "only combination neighborhood, community and regional park site between Pinto Lake (in Watsonville) and Santa Cruz."

But the property has also been eyed for years by a coalition of church and synagogue groups, known as the Ecumenical Community Housing Organization (ECHO), as a site for senior citizen housing. ECHO currently has an option to purchase the property, which has been valued at \$1.8 million by the county assessor.

ECHO spokesman Bob, Stoessel, who said Tuesday that the Planning Department has already conducted a preliminary review of the group's project, said there was no need to turn the entire Polo Grounds property into a regional park.

Stoessel said that if ECHO acquires the parcel and proceeds with its development, four acres of the property would be given to the county for park use, and another "six to seven acres" would be available for county "procurement."

He also said that a regional park with football, soccer and baseball fields, as proposed by Angove, would

result in more traffic than the ECHO project, which is expected to house 600 to 700 retirees.

ECHO supporter Mary Wheeler told supervisors Tuesday that the county already has "an abundance of parks." She said the county may have too much of a good thing and suggested that the board, with the exception of its oldest member — Live Oak Supervisor Dan Forbus — was insensitive to the needs of senior citizens.

"We are a hedonistic society," said Wheeler. "We only like to look at the fun side of life."

"In my eyes," said Wheeler, a rail-thin, silver-haired woman who later declined to reveal her age, "all of you are very young."

Wheeler urged supervisors to "examine your consciences and see if you are not getting caught up in the hoopla of youth."

"There is another side of life — growing old and dying — for which Santa Cruz County has given no consideration," she said. "Can't you see it in your hearts to spare the Polo Grounds for that other side of living?"

Board Chairman Gary Patton indicated Tuesday that he might prefer to spare the Polo Grounds for agriculture.

Patton called Angove's overall proposal a "major initiative on a number of fronts — all of which are worth pursuing." But he noted that there was a third possibility for the Polo Grounds, besides turning it into a park or a senior citizens housing complex.

"We could retain the land in its present agricultural designation and use," said Patton, "and I, for one,

have given up on that."

Any said Tuesday that a Parks Department master plan, which will soon go to the Planning Commission, calls for a General Plan amendment

specifically designating the Polo Grounds for park use. But, he said, even if that change was approved by the commission and supervisors, ECHO would not be precluded from

developing senior citizen housing on the site should the county fail to purchase it.

Stoessel said that, by right of its option on the Polo Grounds land,

ECHO is first in line to buy the property. He said that even if the county makes an offer for the land, it cannot acquire the site unless ECHO declines to match the county's bid.