

# Park urged for Polo Grounds

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A two-year effort to develop a senior citizens housing complex on the Polo Grounds in Aptos has run into new opposition.

The Santa Cruz County Parks Commission decided last night to recommend that the supervisors designate the entire 62-acre parcel as regional park land. The commission advises the county Board of Supervisors and has no authority of its own.

The Polo Grounds, at the end of Polo Drive north of the Rio del Mar freeway exit, is currently designated as agricultural land.

The county Planning Commission decided last year to reserve part of the land for a community park of 10 to 25 acres.

The Parks Commission vote last night followed more than an hour of sometimes heated testimony.

Most of the speakers said they favored the project, which has been proposed by a group of

churches and synagogues called the Ecumenical Community Housing Organization. ECHO proposes a full-range of housing for older people, including condominiums, affordable rentals, a "congregate care" facility providing meals and recreation, and a nursing home. ECHO is awaiting county approval of the project design.

Proponents of the project included representatives from the California Grey Bears and the county Seniors Commission. They said the ECHO project would help fill a great need.

Several of the speakers strongly opposed the idea of a regional park, which they said would draw undesirable traffic and visitors.

Robert Barton, an Aptos consultant on the project, objected to what he called the sudden appearance of the regional park idea. He criticized the commission for considering the idea without first holding neighborhood meetings. He said the idea "torpedoed" more than two years of cooperative planning for a project that would greatly benefit the county.

"All of a sudden," Barton said, "out of the blue, there is a regional park designation."

If the commission wanted to set aside the property for a park, he argued, it should also show how the county would come up with the estimated \$4 million fair-market value of the land.

Two people urged developing the Polo Grounds as a regional park. One was John Morris, who said he represented the newly formed Polo Grounds Neighborhood Association. He said the senior housing complex, with its employees and visitors, would generate heavy traffic.

Jumping from his seat in obvious agitation, Morris accused Polo Grounds owner Richard Hunter of trying to "launder" money through the ECHO project.

Hunter, angered by Morris' words, jumped up and said, "Shut up. You're totally out of order."

Hunter accused Morris of twice slandering him and said his accusations were based on some "crazy notion."

After the meeting, Hunter said he has owned the land for 22 years and made several unsuccessful attempts at developing it. He explained he had entered an agreement with ECHO that gives the group the option to buy the property within five years.

Despite the show of support for the ECHO project, Commissioner Norman Daily, who represents the Aptos-Capitola area, urged his fellow commissioners to support the regional park recommendation.

He said Aptos is running out of park space. And, despite the strong anti-park sentiment expressed at the meeting, he said he believed there was widespread community support for more parks.

The commission voted 3-1 to recommend the Polo Grounds be designated as a regional park. Commissioner Robert Ball, who represents the Watsonville area, dissented. He said, "We certainly do need parks, but sometimes we have to have a heart."

He said he hated to see the cooperative effort "go down the drain."



Right now, the undeveloped Polo Grounds are a good place to take a solitary walk.

Kurt Ellison