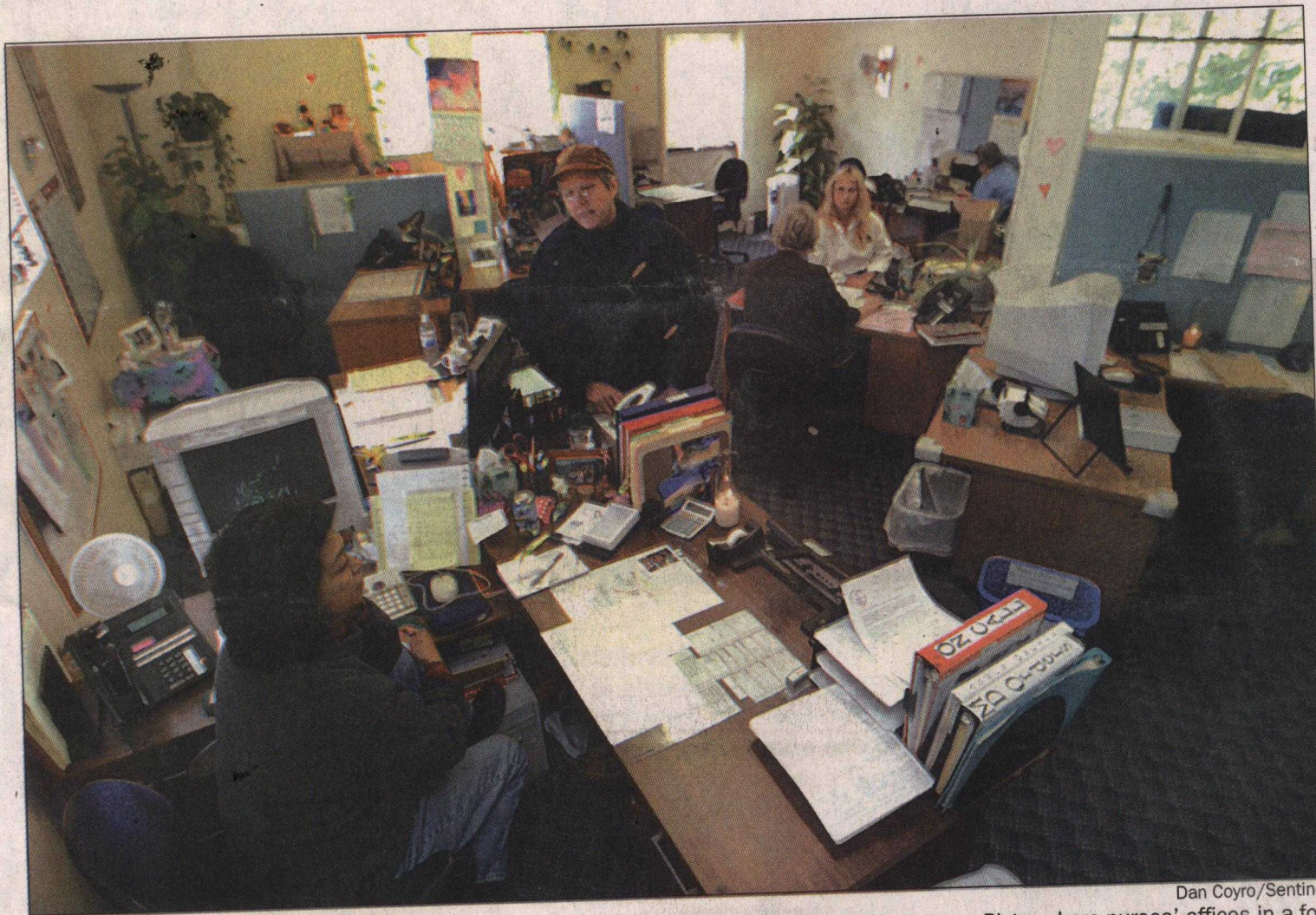


# Hospice plan divides community

Some residents angry over proposed office in neighborhood



Dan Coyro/Sentinel

Hospice Caring Project now occupies cramped spaces in a converted home near Cabrillo College. Pictured are nurses' offices in a former garage.

By JEANENE HARLICK  
SENTINEL STAFF WRITER

APTOS — A community organization has unleashed a storm of contention among residents who support the agency but oppose its precedent-setting plan to build office headquarters in a rural neighborhood.

In October, the Planning Commission approved Hospice Caring Project's plans to build new office headquarters on a 3-acre site on Freedom Boulevard. The 13,000-square-foot building would replace the organization's current Soquel Drive home, which hospice says it's outgrown.

But more than 200 Freedom

**'This would set a terrible precedent for building on residential-agricultural land.'**

ELLEN PIRIE, COUNTY SUPERVISOR

Boulevard neighbors say the Planning Commission violated anti-sprawl regulations and zoning codes when it approved the project. The land is zoned residential-agricultural, which prohibits most commercial uses.

County Supervisor Ellen Pirie agrees the site isn't appropriate for hospice.

"This would set a terrible precedent for building on residential-

agricultural land," she said.

The Board of Supervisors will hear neighbors' appeal of the ruling Tuesday.

Pirie and area residents say a general plan amendment is needed to move the project forward. That would require full environmental review of the development.

But Planning Department staff maintain the project's community-oriented services fall within uses

allowed by current zoning. Staff is recommending the board uphold the Planning Commission's approval.

The new hospice building would include a 79-space parking lot, meeting rooms, conference rooms, counselors' offices, a reference library and kitchen. It's designed to house hospice staff and provide a place where the public can attend support groups, counseling and educational meetings.

The project has many area residents torn between their regard for hospice and their opposition to development.

"I have a tremendous amount of respect for hospice," said Nora Please see **HOSPICE** on **BACK PAGE**

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Bianchi, who lives a half-mile from the proposed site. "Having experienced it firsthand I feel somewhat conflicted about (the project)."

Hospice seeks to make a person's last days as comfortable as possible by addressing both physical and emotional needs. Nurses, chaplains, counselors and more provide care in patients' homes so they can die in familiar surroundings with family and friends.

The organization's business has doubled in recent years — from 300 in 1998 to 600 currently — and is expected to grow even more as the county's elderly population increases.

Patricia Dunbar, interim executive director, stands by the Freedom Boulevard plan.

"I think residents' issues have been addressed and that this is an appropriate use for the site," Dunbar said. "We haven't been successful in finding other property. This is our best bet out of what we've seen."

The centrally located property would allow the organization to more-easily serve clients across the county, Dunbar said.

A legal battle appears to be brewing. Area residents have formed the Rural Aptos Community Association and hired a lawyer to fight the project.

"This issue is really being obscured by hospice being the (ones) who've taken out the development application," said Lynn Sheehan, who owns a bed and breakfast behind the proposed site and is opposed to the development.

"If it was any other organization, you'd



Dan Coyro/Sentinel

Proposed site of the Hospice Caring Project building on Freedom Blvd. at Valencia is a big concern to neighbor Lynn Sheehan, whose Sand Rock Farm B&B is situated just behind the building site.

say, 'I can't even believe they're attempting to do this,' " added Francois Henley, chair of the new association.

Sheehan was guaranteed a single-family home would be built next to her property when she bought it in 1999.

"Two senior planning officials assured me I didn't need to worry about what would get built there," she said. "I'm quite shocked this is where we are three years later."

A horse stable sits on the other side of the

proposed hospice site.

The project has supporters as well as detractors. The Rev. Mark Fountain of the Congregational Church of Soquel said he backs the move because expansion of hospice would be good for the community.

"We have an extraordinarily strong chapter here in the county ... Their contribution to the lives of individuals and families facing end-of-life issues has been invaluable," he said. "I know what a responsible

group they are. I would think they would also be responsible neighbors."

The Central Water District has joined the opposition effort.

Years ago, the county set aside the Freedom Boulevard neighborhood as a prime spot for recharging the Aromas Red Sands Aquifer. That limited lot sizes to 10-acre minimums and prohibited large-scale development, which stops rainwater from seeping underground to aquifers.

"With one hand the county created the conditions and now with the other hand they seem to be waiving them," said Wales. "That particular site is one of the most prominent recharge areas in the vicinity."

The aquifer already is stressed and experiencing saltwater intrusion, Wales said. Heavy use could threaten future water quality and supply, he said.

Sitting outside the urban services boundary, the property cannot be hooked up to a sewer line and would require its own septic system. Area residents and the Central Water District say septic tank leaching could contaminate local wells.

"Anybody who lives in a residentially zoned area should be concerned about this issue," said Jonathan Wittwer, the attorney representing RACA. "This would be a shift to say you can have commercial development on small parcels in any (rural) residential area."

Supervisors will hear the Planning Commission appeal at 1:30 p.m. Tuesday in board chambers at the county government building, 701 Ocean St.

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