

Abalone farm OK'd by planners

By MARIA GAURA
Sentinel staff writer

SANTA CRUZ — After wending its way through the county's planning process for a year, a controversial plan to build an abalone farm on a North Coast brussels sprouts field was approved by the Planning Commission Wednesday.

The commission voted 5-0 to approve Pacific Mariculture's proposal after a long public hearing and intense negotiations between commission members. Wednesday's hearing was the continuation of a hearing begun Jan. 25.

While onlookers had jammed the supervisors' chamber to participate in earlier hearings on the project, the crowd had dwindled to fewer than 30 people by the end of Wednesday's session.

Opponents of the abalone farm have vowed to appeal the commission's decision to the county Board of Supervisors, and may even try to force a referendum on the issue should their appeal fail.

"This is only a temporary setback," said Zoltan Egeresi, a member of the Sand Hill Bluff Neighborhood Association, the main group opposing the plan. "We will appeal this to the supervisors and to the Coastal Commission ... we will take all the legal actions. We will collect 7,000 signatures to stop the pro-

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— Zoltan Egeresi, project opponent

ject at this location."

But Pete Scrivani, co-owner of Pacific Mariculture, expressed relief that his ordeal was over, albeit temporarily.

"I think we have to anticipate an appeal," he said. "However I'm encouraged at the 5-0 vote. It's very positive. The Planning Commission and staff have probably reviewed this (project) as in-depth as anything in recent history."

Though four commissioners clearly intended to support the project early on, commission members went out of their way to forge a compromise agreement with Commissioner Denise Holbert, Third District Supervisor Gary Patton's appointee, who expressed serious concerns with portions of the project.

Holbert's main concern was with a proposal to drill through the roof of a mudstone sea cave to install a seawater discharge pipe. Opponents claimed the sea cave was the third largest in California, and would become a "cesspool" of abalone feces if the pipe was in-

stalled.

Planning staff and the project's engineer said using the large cave would keep the pipe from public view and would prevent erosion from occurring on the small beaches at the bottom of the bluffs.

Holbert insisted she would not support a plan that allowed drilling in the large cave, so the commission compromised and ordered the discharge pipe to be installed in a smaller cave, even though the discharge may erode a small beach.

In return, Holbert dropped her request that Scrivani be required to give up his option to buy the land his project will stand on. The request was made in an attempt to ensure that Scrivani will never be able to expand his abalone farm beyond the 3.8-acre site specified in the current plan.

A suggestion that the project site's owners be required to sign a declaration ensuring public access was modified to

a requirement that a road and path near the site not be obstructed by the project.

Another proposal to impose an open space easement or a special agricultural designation on the entire 100-plus acre parcel was dropped. The commission decided that any future development on the full parcel will have to come before the Board of Supervisors or Planning Commission for review.

But the full text of the commissioners' complicated motion remained unclear even after the vote. County Environmental Coordinator Pete Parkinson said he was unsure about all of the changes required by the motion, but promised that a formal summary would be made available by next week.

"If I took a poll now, I'd probably get five different versions of what the motion was," said a weary Scrivani after the hearing. "But as I understand it ... I think I can live with it."

Opponents have 10 days to appeal the commission's action to the Board of Supervisors.

If an appeal is not filed, Scrivani estimates that the project could be cleared by the Coastal Commission and construction begun within three months. Because Pacific Mariculture already runs a small abalone facility, Scrivani said he could be selling his abalone to local restaurants by the end of the year.