



Bob Smith

Biologist Jerry Busch (standing, left), and J. Lohr vice president Richard Wilde (white shirt on the right), discuss the impacts of The Villages development on Struve Slough in the background.

A hike in the 'wilds of Watsonville'

By BOB SMITH
STAFF WRITER

A chilly spring breeze Saturday ruffled the foot-high grass growing over the knolls above the myriad arms of Struve Slough.

Egrets, herons, hawks and kites (the birds, not the man-made kind) all soared above the still-flooded peat bogs of the slough, looking for their evening meals as some 40 men, women and children tramped over the site of the 906-home Villages housing project proposed for a 100-acre portion of the 150-acre site, south of Harkins Slough Road, east of Green Valley Road.

The development will be a mixture of housing types — single-family homes, condominiums and apartments. The plans include 136 rent-subsidized low-income apartments.

The Watsonville City Council will take another look at the project in May when it considers proposals to realign an access road into the property.

The hike was the second of four Earth Day treks in Watsonville designed to acquaint the town's city dwellers with the wild places that are very much a part of Watsonville.

(The third begins at 1 p.m. Saturday at Pinto Lake County Park off Green Valley Road).

Accompanied by representatives of the developer, Jerry Lohr, and led by biologist Jerry Busch of the Watsonville Wetlands Watch, the hikers were given an opportunity to inspect the housing site and how it could affect the wetlands of Struve Slough and its inhabitants.

Busch told the hikers that the slough is just beginning to revert to a wild condition after decades of farming and grazing. For example, the willow trees



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A red bat sleeps, clinging to the stalk of a dead bush on the hillside above Struve Slough.

that are visible from Harkins Slough Road have only begun growing there in the last decade.

The waterfowl, the raptors and their prey are all recent returnees to the slough where cattle grazed during the dry months, and farmers — decades ago — planted beets, carrots and other forage crops.

The Villages wouldn't actually intrude on the wetlands themselves, Busch and J. Lohr vice president Richard Wilde both said. Minimum setbacks for the homes and condominiums would be 50 feet. Some on the hike, however, said that was too close and said 75 to 100 foot setbacks would be more ap-

propriate.

Busch pointed out, however, that the ecosystem of the sloughs involves not only the bogs but also the dry hillsides, which are home in the wet months to rabbits, marsh voles, field mice, foxes and snakes that are prey and predator alike in the complex pattern of life that exists almost unnoticed there.

Hikers even found a red bat, hanging upside down in the tangle of a dead bush. From a distance, the bat looked like a dead leaf or a puff of fur. Hikers were able to photograph and study it for several minutes without it taking apparent notice. They finally moved on, leaving it in peace once again.

Farmer John Larkin, who joined the hikers midway, said the sloughs were the targets of a 1930s era Army Corps of Engineers project to "reclaim" the land by installing tile drains, draining the winter runoff into channels that ran into Monterey Bay.

The project made it possible to intensely farm the dry sloughs for years, Larkin said, growing upward of 30 tons of carrots, beets and other forage per acre.

Larkin also expressed his belief that the state Department of Fish and Game was "killing" the present sloughs by not permitting the water to flow through the sloughs normally. The water, dammed at San Andreas Road, is turning stagnant, Larkin said. The evidence, he said, was the green algae spreading across the still water.

Busch also pointed out the algae cover but attributed the "bloom" to the high concentration of nitrates left in the soil by grazing cattle. Eventually, he said, rain will leach the nitrates out, lessening the algae growth.

The Santa Cruz tarweed is

perhaps the most vexing issue for the developer. The plant, already on the state's endangered species list and being considered for federal protection, inhabits a significant portion of the site.

Biologist Busch said the tarweed is found in 18 locations in Santa Cruz County but the Struve Slough site is larger than all 17 other sites combined.

Lohr vice president Wilde said his company has already begun transplanting the tarweed to another location — something that some hikers scoffed at.

Reaction from the hikers to the impending development was mixed. City Planner Gary Kittleson pointed out that the city needs the housing, particularly the low-income housing that will be built. There are a lot of illegal (housing) units in Watsonville, he said.

"Any garage that doesn't face a street has become an illegal unit," Kittleson said. "This land, by most standards, is buildable land. If it wasn't for the tarweed, we would not be here."

Linda Wilson, chairwoman of the Sierra Club's Santa Cruz Group, said Saturday that she believes Lohr will ultimately prevail.

Still, she said, while relaxing in the lush grass on top of Tarplant Hill, "I can see a lot of problems with the project. We need to contact the City Council and tell them that there should be a lot bigger setbacks and a smaller project. Still, I don't think there is the political will (in Watsonville) to stop it."

Others agreed that development on the knolls was inevitable.

"I don't like the destruction," one man said, "but I can see that the development is going to happen."