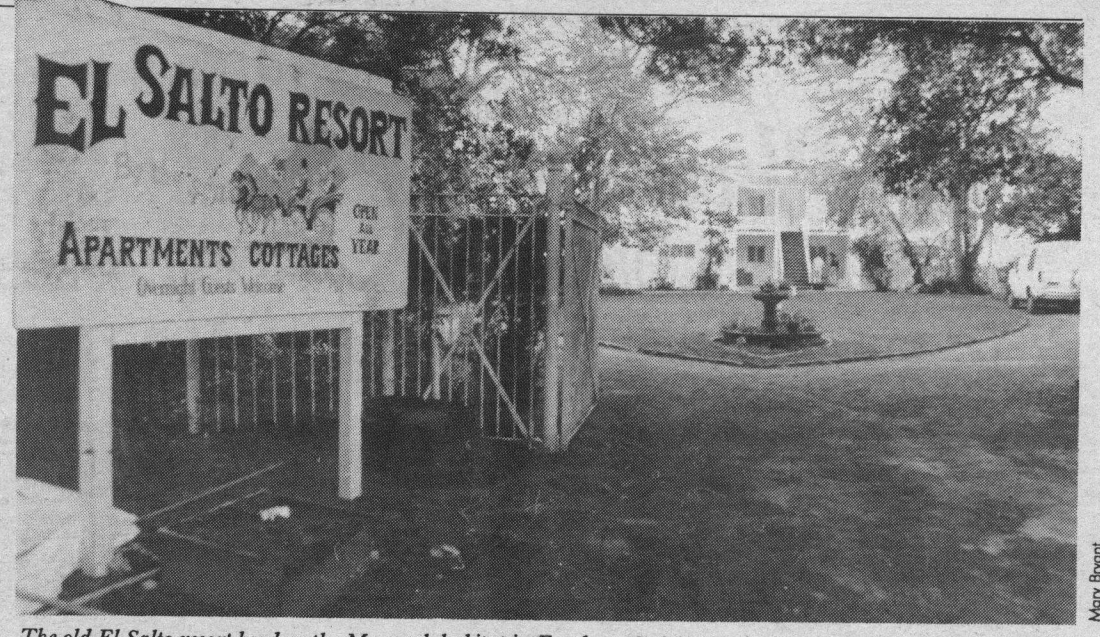
BUILDING AROUND BUTTERFLIES

Houses Planned for Monarch Habitat

by David Klein



The old El Salto resort borders the Monarch habitat in Escalona Gulch.

Mary Bryant

Will the monarch butterfly habitat be destroyed?

That is the one question surrounding Robert Blodgett's proposal to build three single-family residences in the Escalona Gulch area of Capitola.

In all building projects there are environmental questions to be answered: erosion problems, land-use determinations, traffic impacts, drainage. But the 1.3 acres that Blodgett owns is a winter home to the migrating monarch butterfly. And so far this alone has presented the biggest concern.

The Site

The site consists of a sloped wooded gulch at the end of Escalona Drive, which opens up to coastal bluffs overlooking Monterey Bay; a quiet, private area adjacent to the old El Salto resort, and dotted with Eucalyptus trees and Monterey pines.

Presently, there are two A-frame structures on the property. One, dangerously close to the coastal bluff, has already been condemned; the other will be removed if the project is approved.

The Front

The project came up before the Capitola Planning Commission last year, and was put on hold while more information was collected about the possible impacts on the monarch habitat.

Blodgett's initial proposal was for four houses; a revised draft EIR calls for the elimination of one of the houses which if built would force numerous trees to be removed and have roof eaves five feet away from the branches of other eucalyptus trees where monarchs are known to cluster.

The present proposal is for three houses, the one causing the most controversey having been eliminated from the plans.

Butterfly Colony

The Escalona Gulch habitat is the smallest of three large colonies in Santa Cruz County, and contains an average of 32,000 butterflies through November and December, yet is one of the larger of the 200 colonies in the state.

Kathrin Snow, a monarch expert with the not-for-profit Monarch Project, a privately funded organization, said she was hesitant about the proposed development because Escalona Gulch is such an imporant habitat.

"It's large and is well-located in a chain of three habitats along the coast," she said. "The problem is that no single rules apply to development around the habitats. Each case must be looked at separately, although the key ingredients of a habitat remain the same."

She said an appropriate buffer zone within the habitat was imperative to protect the butterflies from wind and storm conditions.

But it remains unclear just how sensitive a monarch habitat is to human encroachment. An extensive report on the impact that Robert Blodgett's development would have on the monarch overwintering habitat was prepared by Paul Cherubini, an entomologist and known butterfly expert.

In his report, Cherubini addressed the microclimate within the canopy of the habitat itself (sunlight, temperature, wind), the physical characteristics of the grove (size, density of trees, understory vegetation), and characteristics of the landscape around the grove (hillside, geographic location and orientation, macroclimate features). Cherubini's report basically concluded that the project could be built without significant impact to the monarch habitat.

He cited several examples of monarch habitats and residential neighborhoods coexisting, particularly one in Pacific Grove, where monarchs returned to an area after houses had been built, and actually clustered within feet of residential homes.

Some of Cherubini's conclusions were questioned by William Calvert, another butterfly expert, who responded in the revised draft EIR to Cherubini's report.

Calvert wrote that in some instances tree pruning and removal has resulted in significant impacts on monarch habitats.

In both reports, conclusions are based on observation and backed by anecdote; solid empirical evidence on the question does not exist, and Calvert suggested that this project be used as an experiment in which data could be collected on impacts. He also suggested the one house that most encroached on the habitat be eliminated.

Coastal Bluff

Another house would be built within 75 feet of the coastal bluff, which is eroding at a rate of about one foot per year. Erosion has already claimed one building of the El Salto resort, a former popular vacation spot now suffering from neglect but undergoing some renovation work. It is owned by Elizabeth Blodgett, Robert's mother.

Capitola Planning Director Susan Tupper said this was a good project.

"It offers the best of both worlds. It lets him [Blodgett] do something with his property and it's going to put the majority of the property into an open space easement which will save the butterfly habitat."

An open space easement is a conservation easement—an area that will be set aside and never developed. This way, what is left of the natural habitat after the construction will be protected.

"A lot of people would like to say that he shouldn't be able to develop anything but the reality is if you can come with an area that won't impact the monarch habitat, then the project is fine," Tupper said.

But no one knows for sure just what the impacts will be. The monarchs are an unpredictable bunch. The monarch has not always wintered at Escalona Gulch. The eucalyptus trees are not native, and before the trees were introduced in 1915, monarchs were presumed to have overwintered in the massive native Monterey pine forests around Point Año Nuevo, the Monterey Peninsula, and Cambria.

In Capitola's General Plan and Local Coastal Plan, the project site is presently designated for use as Park and Open Space. But the city council can change that designation. They will discuss the project at their March 28 meeting *(City Council Chambers, 420 Capitola Avenue 7pm).* ❑

A number of trees in the eucalyptus grove must be removed to make room for houses.

Mary Bryant