

Conservation group may buy part of slough

By KEN McLAUGHLIN

A national conservation group that buys what it considers ecologically valuable land is looking into the possibility of purchasing portions of the Struve Slough, land which the city is hoping to annex.

Carol Blanton, a representative of Nature Conservancy which has a regional office in San Francisco, confirmed yesterday that she had inspected the slough a few weeks ago.

She said that she has not yet contacted any of the owners of the land, but that she hopes to in the near future.

"I'm not a biologist, but it's a pretty important area — I'm sure," she said.

She stressed, however, that "everything is in the preliminary stage."

Ms. Blanton explained that Nature Conservancy is a national non-profit organization dedicated to "the preservation of vanishing natural lands." She said the group has purchased about a quarter million acres of forests, swamps, marshes, prairies, seashores and islands. Locally, the group owns part of Elkhorn Slough.

The group gets most of its money from fund-raising drives on both the national and local level. It also tries to get wealthy land-owners to donate land.

In most cases, the organization tries to sell the land back to municipalities and counties providing the local governments pledge to leave the land undeveloped. In this way, Ms. Blanton explained, more and more valuable land can be purchased.

She said, however, that if local governments aren't interested in buying, the group will retain the land.

Sloughs in the Watsonville area have drawn increasing attention from the state and the county in recent months. A month ago, the state Department of Fish and Game warned the city that the current dumping in

the slough near Ramsay Park is in violation of state wildlife laws and probably the city's own grading ordinance.

The county planning department has also become concerned about unauthorized grading and dumping on slough land the city hopes to annex.

An inter-department county memo indicates the county planners want the district attorney to prosecute what the department says is unauthorized grading on the Berman property on Lee Road bordering on Harkins Slough.

A spokesman for the district attorney's office confirmed that his office has been in touch with the planning department over the allegedly unauthorized grading on the Berman land.

Environmentalists have continually emphasized the value of wetlands. Because of their water - holding capacity, environmentalists say, they act as storage basins which lower flood crests, minimize erosion and serve to reduce the destructiveness of severe floods. In densely populated areas, this is particularly important since cities lack adequate "soak-in areas" to absorb the run-off from urban streets and other paved areas.

Planning director Bob Ellenwood, whose department is presently preparing an environmental impact report on the westside, said this morning that he was not aware of Nature Conservancy's interest in the land, but that he agrees that it is ecologically valuable. The department, he said, has been sent a list of over 50 species of birds that regularly habitate the Struve Slough.

The list prepared by the Santa Cruz Bird Club, includes species such as the white-tailed kite, the southern golden eagle and the peregrine falcon, all of which are protected by federal and state wildlife laws. The eagle and the falcon, he said, were considered endangered species.



Industrial buildings sit near the edge of Struve Slough, haven for many birds.

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