

Activists seek city's help in Laguna winery appeal

by Patty McAlpin
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SEBASTOPOL — Sebastopol city officials will reluctantly take a closer look at a proposed winery near the Laguna de Santa Rosa to see whether there is cause for concern about potential environmental damage.

The City Council last week asked city staff to compile a report detailing whether the project has changed substantially since the city first saw it and if there are any issues that need to be addressed.

The city's action comes after Occidental environmental activist Ann Maurice urged the City Council to join Maurice's Ad Hoc Committee for Clean Water in asking that Sonoma County require a full environmental review of John Balleto's proposed 150,000 case bottling facility on a 300-acre property at

5700 Occidental Rd.

The clean water committee has appealed a Sonoma County Board of Zoning decision approving the Laguna Oaks Winery. The committee alleges the county's approval violates the California Environmental Quality Act. The hearing is scheduled for Jan. 23 at 2:15 p.m. in the Sonoma County Board of Supervisors' chambers.

Maurice asked the council to take a stance on the winery which Maurice says was approved without adequate public participation.

John Balleto, who formed a joint partnership with Cecil and Christine DeLoach to create the new winery, assured the council he has tried to meet environmental concerns.

"We started out planning a much larger capacity winery (Please see Winery page A7)

Winery...

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facility," said Balleto. "After some concern we scaled back. The Laguna Foundation and the city of Sebastopol did not object to our scaled-down facility. I personally spoke to Kim Cordell of the Laguna Foundation."

Balleto said he hired an electronics firm to come up with a different lighting concept and the reduced hours of operation. He has also hired the engineering firm of Brejle & Race to handle the wastewater plan. He added that the new facility will be using 97.5 percent less water than was used for vegetable processing.

the former property use. There is an existing mound septic system.

Balleto said no chemicals are used for the bottling plant. Sulfites are added to the wine to help the fermentation process. Cover crops have been planted for erosion and the setback from the Laguna has been doubled to 100 feet or more.

Balleto is also talking to the Sonoma County Agricultural Preservation and Open Space District about dedicating a forever-wild area by the Laguna and restoration of Duer Creek to its natural state. The Balleto's and DeLoaches have also bought 500 oak seedlings to be planted on the

property.

Jim McMinn of DeLoach invited Ann Maurice of the Ad Hoc Committee for Clean Water to tour the property. Maurice declined.

Balleto, 41, said he has been in the farming business for 24 years. DeLoach has been in business for 30 years.

The Sebastopol Area Chamber of Commerce last week wrote to the city objecting to further city involvement in the appeal of the Laguna Oaks project, which is under the jurisdiction of the county.

"We understood you to say this matter is now under appeal before the Sonoma County Supervisors and that further review or action by

the city of Sebastopol at this point would be the wrong thing to do. We agree, especially in view of the very tight financial situation facing the city at this time," said the chamber letter from Executive Director Teresa Ramondo and Chamber president John Stevens.

"Under those circumstances we believe spending much money on still more technical consultants, duplicating other agencies work, would be inappropriate," said the Chamber letter.

City Councilmembers last week also voiced concerns about how much time and money should be spent on a county issue since the city's only concerns were as a

neighboring property owner.

Sebastopol City Attorney Larry McLaughlin said the City Council could advocate a position, but it would require a technical and legal review.

"How far should we get our nose into the tent?" questioned Councilmember Bill Roventini. "Some of the allegations have merit. How much city money and time should we spend?"

City Manager Dave Brennan suggested that the council consider sending a letter simply stating the Laguna de Santa Rosa's importance and encouraging the Board of Supervisors to give due diligence to the concerns in the appeal.

Councilman Bob Anderson said he would be reluctant to send a letter which suggests the city is taking an appellate position.

Support for the letter was voiced by Councilman Sa... Spooner.

"We are a neighbor next to the Laguna and we have invested a tremendous amount in that resource," said Spooner.

"This is a troubling place to be," said Spooner. "I don't want to make any more loops for Mr. Balleto, but I do not want to circumvent our environmental laws."

The council will review the staff report next week when the council meets at the Pine Crest School gym on Jan. 16.