



Robert Evans (left) strolls at site of proposed development with Planning Commissioner Linda Kelley and City Councilman Larry Robinson.

ERIC LUSE / The Chronicle

Greens split over project in Sebastopol

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"It's one of those questions we struggle with," said Sam Spooner, Sebastopol's mayor and a Green Party City Council member. "The Green Party is about social justice as well as environmental issues."

The Laguna, a 28,000-acre expanse of oak savanna, riparian woodland, pastures and marsh between Cotati and the Russian River, fronts the city's entire eastern border, checking the sprawl of the central county's cities and acting as an emergency bypass during winter floods.

Generally, Sebastopol's large and active environmental community — including the Green Party members who hold three of the five seats on the City Council — considers preservation of the Laguna a prime objective.

But Laguna Vista, a development planned for a 21-acre site south of downtown, has changed the terms of the debate.

The great majority of the city's environmental activists say the 157-unit project will hurt Laguna de Santa Rosa. Few if any champion the development as it is currently presented by its builders, Schellinger Brothers of Santa Rosa.

The company has worked with Sebastopol's planning staff for two years, trying to fine-tune the project to make it acceptable to the City Council. But in August, the council sent Schellinger back to the drawing board.

Unless the firm comes up with a palatable plan by the next meeting in October, the project could be killed outright.

The two council members unaffiliated with the Green Party are not enthused about Laguna Vista. One opposes it outright, and the other has taken a neutral position. But some Greens say they could be persuaded to support a recon-

figured Laguna Vista.

"I'm extremely concerned about affordable housing," said Larry Robinson, a Green Party City Council member running for re-election in November. "We desperately need it in this city, and I'd be willing to make some compromises if we could get it."

Robinson complains that the affordable housing component in the current project consists of an offer to sell the city 2 acres of land at market price, with 40 apartments then to be built by a non-profit construction company.

The remaining buildings — 102 single-family homes and 15 live/work townhouses — would be sold at market value.

"That does nothing to improve the community," Robinson said. "Very few people who work in Sebastopol can afford to live here. I'd be much more inclined to support this if it were scaled back, and the homes were offered at truly affordable prices."

To support the project, Spooner says he'd like to see the homes range in price from \$157,000 to \$212,000.

"By local terms, that's affordable," he said. "As Schellinger is presenting this, their least expensive homes would be about \$350,000. That's not what Sebastopol needs."

But Kenyon Webster, Sebastopol's planning director, says the project is in fact just what Sebastopol needs, at least according to its general plan.

"The city staff recommends approval, essentially because it's consistent with general plan objectives," said Webster. Laguna Vista, he notes, is within the voter-approved urban growth boundaries.

"It is on the margin of the Laguna — the development doesn't intrude into it directly," he said. "And it satisfies a major portion of the city's fair share (affordable) housing obligation

that's required by state law. Basically, this is smart growth."

Joe Ripple, the director of development and real estate operations for Schellinger Brothers, says the company has gone to great lengths to accommodate community concerns.

"It's very confusing to us," said Ripple. "We've been through a very long process with public meetings and the city staff. This project looks very different now than when it first started. But last month, we were basically shut off cold by the City Council. . . . It's frustrating."

Ripple said Schellinger Brothers still "very much wants to work with the council, but (the council) is not explicit on what it needs. It's basically, 'just don't do it!'"

Simply not doing it sounds pretty good to Robert Evans, the president of the Laguna de Santa Rosa Foundation. Evans likes the green space just as it is.

"The affordable housing angle has attracted people of good heart," said Evans. "But (affordable housing) is so tied in with the bigger development that they could end up supporting the whole thing. Even Larry (Robinson) would allow them to encroach on an area where we have extensive vernal pools. I'm saying, get real — this is prime habitat."

Evans ticks off his problems with the development.

"About 17 of the project's 21 acres adjoin wetlands," he said. "Seven acres are below the 100-year floodplain — and we've been getting 100-year floods every five or six years the last couple of decades."

Sebastopol's zoning ordinances would allow the council to declare a "scenic overlay" on those 17 acres. The council members "haven't looked at that option, and they need to."

While acknowledging the need for affordable housing in Sebastopol, Evans says it should be built

near the town core, minimizing traffic and creeping sprawl.

"There's no place like this in the county," Evans said on a recent visit to the Laguna Vista site. He gestured to the expansive gold-and-green savanna dotted with great valley oaks. Emerald marshlands and riparian groves stretched to the north.

"Mountain lions are regularly sighted right below there," he said, pointing to a nearby stand of eucalyptus. "We have large populations of rare and endangered animals such as short-eared owls, river otters and badgers. The Laguna is truly irreplaceable."

Conservationists have succeeded in preserving 3,000 acres of the Laguna through land purchases and conservation easements, said Evans, "and our goal is 10,000 acres. And I think we have the community support to do it. Nobody doubts we need affordable housing in Sebastopol, but I think most people feel we don't need to intrude on the Laguna to get it."

But Ripple says such uncompromising conservationist sentiment has a profound downside — a housing crisis of truly dire proportions, unique for a rural area.

"Sebastopol isn't going to stop growing, so the demand for housing of all kinds is going to skyrocket, and everything will become increasingly expensive," he said. "On top of that, what's happening at Laguna Vista is a red flag for developers. When they see that a quality project like this can't get approved, they're going to be very hesitant about getting involved here. It's too risky."

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