

Crowd gets crash course on Laguna

by Barry W. Dugan
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SEBASTOPOL — Nearly 200 people turned out for the first annual Laguna Awareness Day Sunday and received a crash course in the history and value of the 77,000 acres of wetlands, including the beleaguered waterway that flows along the city's edge.

Organized as a day of "healing and learning about the Laguna de Santa Rosa," the event at the Sebastopol Community Center featured speakers, music and ceremony aimed at heightening awareness of the Laguna's importance as a natural resource.

The event was also in response to recent debates at the City Council over funding for the long-awaited Laguna Park, which would include interpretive trails and

restoration efforts. Another impetus for the event, which has focused attention on the waterway, was a recent spill of apple waste into the Laguna.

"The response was just phenomenal," said Jeffrey Edelhelt, one of the organizers of the event, and a member of the Laguna Foundation. "I would say it was successful ... we can't put the future of the Laguna in the hands of one vote ... the fate of it has to be in the community. The community has to realize that it has to be the steward of the Laguna."

On hand Sunday were several elected officials, including West County Supervisor Mike Reilly. "We need to raise public awareness about the importance of this resource," he said. "We have a special obligation and responsibility to preserve and [Please see *Laguna* page A12]

Among those receiving recognition were Dave Baranzini, director of the city's Public Works Department, Michael Kyes, a Laguna watchdog and activist, and Robert Sharp, president emeritus of the Laguna de Santa Rosa Foundation.

City Councilmembers Ann Magnie, Ken Foley and Kathy Austin were present, along with Mayor Sam Crump. "This is a nice event," said Foley. "It's always terrific when folks get together to show their support for something and learn a little more about the Laguna and the area around them."

Visitors learned plenty from the speakers, among them Alan Buckmann of the state Department of Fish and Game. Buckmann described the Laguna as "a huge floodway ... it is an extremely important flood basin for the Russian River."

But farming in the Laguna has led to severe siltation, diminishing the Laguna's effectiveness to store flood waters. Agricultural practices have also removed riparian habitat, degrading the Laguna system. "It would be better to get agriculture out of the floodway ... better to have river habitat and restore what is left of the riparian habitat ... you can rebuild habitat, all you have to do is leave it alone. Some times benign neglect is the best thing you can do."

The day ended with a ceremony by DeAnna L'am, a priestess who leads the Graton Groves congregation. She said the ceremony, which was accompanied by the Anzal High Choir, "was extremely important because people came together that don't normally think they have anything in common ... farmers, environmentalists, all kinds of people. It was the whole community. I think it was a first ... it is significant."

Laguna . . .

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restore the Laguna ... we need to all be advocates of people-use of the Laguna in a passive way ... we need to be careful about recreational uses ... that includes intense uses such as

golf courses."

Richard Nichols, director of Coastwalk and one of the founders of the movement to save the Laguna, had praise for the event. "This event here is about a lot of people finally realizing how important the Laguna is. This is a diverse group ... the city, Barlow, it's

not just environmentalists."

The event was sponsored by the Laguna Foundation, The Barlow Company, The Sebastopol Community Center and Sebastopol Tomorrow.

Nichols said the recent spill of apple waste was regrettable, but served a purpose.

"I hated to see the spill

happen, but let's recognize it for what it is, an indication of the problem, and that we are still not paying attention. And now people are paying attention."

Many of those in attendance paid attention for all four hours of slide shows, speeches and awards.