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OPEN SPACE

**Council caves in
on Laguna golf**

by Guy Wilson



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The recent political events in the Laguna golf course controversy bring to mind a couple of four-letter words beginning with the letter "f."

The first such f-word is "fore!" In golf, "fore" is the traditional word of courtesy that is shouted by a player who is about to tee off, so as to warn anyone within range of the probable line of flight of the ball he is about to whack. "Fore" is a polite way of saying: "here I come, so get the ... out of the way!" At the Sebastopol City Council meeting on April 7 a delegation of officials from Santa Rosa, supported by a number of local golfing enthusiasts, symbolically said "fore" to the Sebastopol Council members as they presented their plans to build a golf course on the Kelly Farm Laguna property owned by Santa Rosa. The other f-word is "four." In arithmetic, "four" is the word that identifies the number that comes after three and before five. "Four" also happens to be the exact number of Sebastopol City Council members who voiced no

objection at the April 7 Council meeting to the Laguna golf course plan. These four — Kathy Austin, Ken Foley, Bill Rovennti, and Sam Crump — basically got out of the way as the Laguna golf supporters came on with their plan. Austin, Foley, and Rovennti limited themselves to asking a few friendly questions concerning the details of the golf course plan, without once questioning the very idea of having a golf course on the Laguna. Crump, already struggling with a sizable handicap in his race for the State Assembly, wisely said nothing at all.

The passive behavior of these four Council members in response to the Laguna golf course proposal should not be surprising to those who have followed the recent history of Sebastopol politics. In September 1995, Council members Foley, Crump, and Rovennti all voted in favor of developing the Palm Terrace luxury home subdivision on the western end of the Laguna in Sebastopol. Austin, then a member of the Planning Commission, publicly supported the Palm Terrace project. Indeed, the Palm Terrace project was a done deal and would have been built had there not been a "Save the Laguna" campaign led by Bill Haigwood and local environmentalist and publisher Juliana Doms.

In 1996, Foley, Crump, Rovennti, and Austin all opposed the Urban Growth Boundary Initiative. That same year, Foley publicly stated his support for the idea of building a golf course on the Laguna. In 1997, while serving as mayor of Sebastopol, Crump, too, stated his support for the Laguna golf course concept. In that same year, Crump learned

with Foley in an unsuccessful effort to remove Sebastopol Tomorrow from the Laguna Park Implementation Committee, and Crump and Foley then fought to limit funding for the initial phase of an environmental park for the Laguna, arguing instead for spending public funds on more "active recreational" projects. Were it not for an unexpected six figure donation earlier this year from a private citizen, the fate of the Laguna environmental park would still be uncertain.

In short, it would be naive to think that the current City Council views the Laguna as being off limits to development, or that they are interested in devoting public resources to restoring the Laguna to its natural state. It would be really naive to think that the Council will be proactive in encouraging any political opposition to the Laguna golf course. If anything, the Council seems already to have conceded that a golf course on the Laguna, with the right planning, could be environmentally acceptable, and now the task is simply to cut the best possible deal with Santa Rosa, which, after all, owns the Laguna property on which it intends to build the golf course.

Only one current Council member, Arne Magnie, has gone on record as opposing a Laguna golf course, no matter how artfully the plans may be drawn. At the April 7 session, Magnie asked the Rosa delegation. She elicited from one delegate the candid response that the "driving" force behind Santa Rosa's plans to build a golf course on the Laguna (as opposed to building a course on less environmentally delicate sites that are available

closer to Santa Rosa) was the "golfing community." In other words, the golfers of Santa Rosa have let their elected officials know that they want a golf course built on the Laguna rather than anywhere else, so now Santa Rosa is going forward with plans to build a golf course on the Laguna. What could be simpler?

Magnie also elicited the unintentionally droll statement from a Santa Rosa representative that the Laguna is "big" — the implication being that because the Laguna is "big," then certainly a couple hundred acres could be spared for a golf course. The same representative told Magnie that he had talked with "Dennis," the golf pro at the Bodega Harbor course, who had provided reassuring information to the effect that a wonderful golf course can co-exist with a natural habitat. Who are we to question the environmental wisdom of Dennis the golf pro?

Of course, none of this is very funny to those who are opposed to a Laguna golf course in any form. To Laguna preservationists, it may be comforting to think that the foreplay at the April 7 Council session will have no lasting political significance. But the willing, receptive response of four Council members to the idea of a Laguna golf course, coupled with their history of indifference toward Laguna environmental issues, suggests otherwise. In one strange evening, the issue has been transformed from whether the golf course will be built to how the golf course will be built. Perhaps a real four letter word is in order here.

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