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Re: Comments concerning the Resource Conservation Element

In all, the Resource Conservation Element is the most comprehensive, intelligent and in-depth approach to stewardship of our public and private natural resources developed by a California county to date. It is an exemplary, far-sighted document which will serve as a model to other counties for years to come. I urge the Commission to recommend adoption with minor deletions, if any. I would like to recommend several additions which I believe would strengthen to overall integrity of the document.

Item 1.

By adding the following policy to Section 5.1, Policy to Conserve Important Habitats and Biotic Communities (page 13), the County will be stating its intention to ensure compliance with Section 404 of the federal Clean Water Act.

RC-5d: Applicants seeking discretionary permits or grading permits which propose the filling of any wetlands (including those that do not appear on the "Schematic Map of Designated Natural Resource Protection Areas," Figure OS-3) will be required to file for and receive a Section 404 Fill Permit from the Army Corps of Engineers before approval of a project.

Comment: The Army Corps of Engineers is the federal agency charged with enforcing provisions of the Clean Water Act. They will assert jurisdiction over intermittent streams, wet swales, seasonal marshes and vernal pools; of which most are not protected by County policies in the Open Space Element. The entire Santa Rosa plain is laced by a network of wetlands, such as swales, vernal pools and intermittent streams, which are often illegally graded and filled because of incomplete biotic information in initial studies. Any development proposals planned for valley bottoms or flat hummocky topography have a high likelihood of containing wetlands within jurisdiction of the Army Corps of Engineers. Projects proposed for these sites should be required to provide biotic assessments that include a wetland inventory.

Item 2.

The following policies would add a degree of protection to important or unique biotic resources which are subject to deleterious effects of irrigation with wastewater effluent.

RC-5e: Prohibit sprinkler irrigation of wastewater effluent which will damage the health and reproductive potential of trees in the oak savanna (Quercus lobata), or will threaten the existence of native bunchgrass communities.

RC-6c: Prohibit sprinkler irrigation which would threaten any population of rare or endangered species.

Comment: While individual valley oaks are commonly seen in Sonoma County, the oak savanna community is being threatened. This uncommon plant community is typified by the regularly spaced oaks apparent to travellers along Highway 12 between Santa Rosa and Sebastopol. It is a welcome, familiar site, as much a part of Sonoma County as the vineyards, the redwood forest or the coastline. Unfortunately, the only significant recruitment of new oak seedlings is occurring along road right of ways or in abandoned orchards. The problem is most apparent between Santa Rosa and Sebastopol where grazing and haying are killing most new seedlings and the unnatural soil moisture conditions from constant summer irrigation are reducing the vigor of existing oaks. Eventually the plain will be treeless, unless a comprehensive management plan is developed which protects existing trees and provides for establishment of new trees to replace the old.

Item 3.

This plan should be part of a greater Laguna de Santa Rosa Conservation Program which I recommend be added to Section 11.0 (page 27), Resource Conservation Implementation Programs: 1987-1992. Suggested details might include:

Resource Conservation Program 3: Laguna de Santa Rosa Conservation Program

Type of Program: General policy documents and potential ordinance amendments

81-9

Responsible Agency: Planning Department, Fish and Game, Soil Conservation Service, etc.

Timeframe: to be completed within three years of the adoption of the revised general plan

Budgetary Impact: Minimal to Planning Department. Funds provided by Fish and Game grants, Soil Conservation Service grants, monies from Open Space Districts, volunteer time and labor from conservation groups

Policy Reference: RC-5a, OS-4a, OS-4b, OS-4c, OS-4d, OS-4e and the suggested policy additions I made, RC-4d, RC-4e

Program Description: A comprehensive management plan will be developed which provides details regarding the current status of wetlands, rare and endangered species habitat and the oak savanna. Threats to these resources will be identified. Means of wetland restoration, establishment of rare and endangered species preserves and an oak replanting program will specified using agency expertise in cooperation with interest groups and local landowners (of which a public entity, the City of Santa Rosa may be the largest). Monies granted by public agencies will be used to develop the plans. Implementation will be funded from these sources as well as the Open Space Districts being proposed in the Open Space Plan. Other funds can be obtained from mitigation banks, which have presently been established to offset impacts from geothermal resources. These banks can be expanded to preserve offsite wetlands and other habitats to offset impacts from development around the urban periphery and elsewhere in the County.

Comment: By development of a Laguna Conservation Program, the County may be able to avoid or minimize the jurisdictional involvement of the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service and the Army Corps of Engineers. This scenario could develop if rare and endangered wetland species become threatened enough to prompt federal protection. This situation will involve an environmental impact statement and federal agency review of any development potentially affecting federally listed species. By the same token, a comprehensive wetland mitigation plan will expedite processing of fill permits granted by the Army Corps of Engineers under Section 404 of the Clean Water Act.