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The Planning Commission must now go through a public hearing phase before the ordinance can be put into effect. According to Aspinall, hearings are tentatively scheduled for March 28.

The intent of the ordinance as stated in the current draft is "to preserve and protect environmentally sensitive waterways and wetlands," specifically the Laguna de Santa Rosa and the area surrounding it on the eastern edge of Sebastopol's city limits, and "to establish land use limitations consistent with natural resource preservation of wetland areas."

The revised ordinance creates three wetlands districts, defined by their elevation relative to the Laguna's 100-year flood line and the type of vegetation and wildlife habitat they contain.

The Primary Wetlands (W) District is applied to "those lands lying below the 100-year flood line which are in an open, natural state, and which contain, or which could contain, natural and native wetlands and related vegetation/habitat areas."

Such districts would be subject to the tightest restrictions, and a permit would be required for any use. Development would essentially be prohibited in "W" Districts under the ordinance, which would allow only "open, passive recreational areas, parks, wildlife preserves" and "open agricultural uses, not including any buildings." In addition, native vegetation in these areas could not be removed or damaged.

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—Richard Nichols

The Secondary Wetlands (WS) District will apply to lands under the 100-year flood line which "are in a biologically altered state and/or do not contain wetlands or related vegetation, but which have a direct physical or functional relationship to a wetlands area and its ecosystem." Use permits would be required for any use planned for secondary wetlands, and use would be regulated both by criteria of the underlying base district and restrictions contained in the ordinance itself regarding review by regulatory agencies, vernal pool and rare plant studies, landfill setbacks and slope limits, erosion control, toxic waste storage, pesticide use and revegetation of disturbed areas.

Some areas adjacent to wetlands will be subject to designation as Wetlands Fringe (WF) Districts. The WF District applies to "lands lying above the 100-year flood line, but which abut a Primary or Secondary Wetlands District and/or which may have a direct or indirect influence on a wetlands area and its ecosystem."

Secondary and Fringe Wetlands Districts may be combined with a "base district," specifying industrial, commercial, residential or agricultural uses. Land use on parcels contained in a "Combining District" must be aligned with the restrictions applied to both the base distict and the wetlands overlay district.

Aspinall pointed out that revision of the ordinance will not automatically rezone wetlands areas not yet zoned as such. In order for new wetland districts to be added, the property owner must apply for rezoning, or the Planning Commission or City Council must pass a resolution of intention to do so.

Nichols, whose comments as a member of the Laguna Advisory Committee about the original wetlands ordinance's weakness became the impetus for revision of the ordinance, was pleased with the new regulations.

"I think, in the long run, it's going to be beneficial to everyone," said Nichols. "If we can get it passed I think it will really be helpful because it will define exactly what's going on with development."