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APPLESAUCE

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Old battles, new horizons

By Bruce Robinson

Here we go, another fresh year ready and waiting, as yet unsullied by acrimonious argument, bumbling bureaucrats, cantankerous citizens, duplicitous decision-making, and/or excessive editorializing. It was nice while it lasted, wasn't it?

In the 12 months ahead, it can safely be predicted that planning issues will again dominate the news from occasionally quiet Sebastopol. On one front, all the vitriol and passion that have characterized the debate over growth concerns are likely to center on the final resolution of perhaps the most bitterly debated project site in the city. On another, with far-ranging implications for the city's future, a more reasoned and inclusive approach may ultimately yield a diminution of new battles in the years ahead.

This latter forum is the city's newly retooled General Plan, a document that is being thoroughly revamped with, for the first time in Sebastopol's history, a full-time city planner on staff. Working with a General Plan consultant who knows Sebastopol quite thoroughly (a consequence of living there for some years) and an Advisory Committee that included able and articulate representatives of most of the divergent views on growth issues, the draft plan appears to be a thoughtful set of compromises that tries hard to realistically incorporate some difficult choices.

Still, much of the emphasis will center on the City Council's bold decision to sharply pull in the city's Sphere of Influence, a move that sweepingly eliminates the potential annexation of a number of environmentally sensitive sites upon which various development possibilities had been considered. Naturally, those doing that considering are not happy about the civic shrinkage, and it is a safe bet that they will voice that displeasure in no uncertain terms when public hearings on the revised General Plan begin in the next few weeks.

Meanwhile, another sensitive Sebastopol project that is "in the pipeline" ahead of the General Plan update is about to end its quiet simmering and boil over into a new round of headlines.

For a while there, it looked as though developer George Young's intensely controversial Palm Terrace subdivision would be the wedge that could seriously divide Sebastopol's citizenry. Virtually no one had no opinion on this sizable residential expansion on a hillside at the very edge of the Laguna de Santa Rosa. Neighbors and environmentalists hated it with a white hot fury. Property rights advocates and growth supporters were four-square behind it. And both sides harbored an intense distrust of the other.

None of that has changed, but the nature of the project itself, and the way it is being presented to the city, definitely has. The adjunct development that Young at one time proposed (and wryly titled Saddle Burr) has been dropped, and with it, the need to annex any additional lands into the city before the Palm Terrace project can proceed. Roads have been moved, densities shifted, purchase prices adjusted, all in a determined effort to both overcome the various obstacles identified in the Palm Terrace EIR and appease the design sensitivities previously expressed by city planners and council members.

At the same time, Young has taken steps to remove himself from the discussion, hiring a team of agreeable representatives to shepherd his project through the approval process while he retains a politically prudent low profile. None of the active players in the Palm Terrace debate have forgotten the vicious last-minute "hit piece" that broadsided council candidates Howard Levy and Nichols Stewart immediately before the 1992 election, and few have swallowed whole Young's denials of involvement. Although no conclusive accountability for the attack has been established, what evidence there was led straight to Young's doorstep, and no credible alternative theories have been advanced in the past 14 months. That is not sufficient basis for denial of a development proposal, of course, but it does tend to ensure that his project will undergo exceedingly close scrutiny.

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Elsewhere around town, the new downtown plaza and surrounding streetscape should begin to take shape as the weather clears for summer, and the transformation of the Speas distillery from prominent eyesore to community attraction should become visible concurrently. The new Little League field on the Analy High School campus will see a lot of action through the spring and summer months, and with luck and the kind of broad-based support that created the popular Super Playground, a new Sebastopol Teen Center may become a reality before the year is out. Many of the planning pieces are in place for this much-desired addition to the cultural landscape, including the future creation of an extensive and similarly longed-for public park along the adjacent edge of the Laguna.

That, however, will have to await another new year or two before it can take that giant step from detailed drawings to a physical reality.