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Land Trust slams press coverage

Officials of the Sonoma Land Trust this week blasted recent reports that the private land-preservation group was going broke and was being forced to lay off its director and a top consultant.

"The Land Trust is not in any kind of crisis situation," said Vice President Michael Friedenberg.

The *Press Democrat* reported that the trust was dumping Executive Director Dan Schurman and Joan Vilms, who has been a consultant with the trust since 1977. Friedenberg said Schurman is leaving but that neither he nor Vilms was asked to leave. In fact, Vilms just signed a new contract with the Land Trust, according to Friedenburg. Vilms confirmed she will work 30 hours a month for the group in 1994.

"It was completely untrue that she was leaving," Friedenburg said.

Trust officials say the *PD* ran another erroneous story on Jan. 9 that claimed the group was in financial trouble. The article cited 1991 tax records that showed an operating income of $400,000. A year later, the budget shrank to $240,576. But according to Schurman, 1991 income was abnormally high because that year the trust performed technical services under a California State Coastal Conservancy contract.

Schurman claims he spent most of 1992 trying to restore public confidence in the county's largest private land-preservation group. The Land Trust's reputation was damaged as a result of the *Press Democrat*'s controversial coverage of a deal to restrict development on the 3,000-acre McCord ranch in northeastern Sonoma County. The deal eventually went through, and the Sonoma County Open Space District got development restrictions on the $1.7 million property for $730,000.

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Under the rules governing open-space acquisitions, owners are entitled to fair market value for conservation easements on their property, so the Open Space District apparently got a bargain. The *PD* opposed the sale of the ranch's conservation rights that the Land Trust brokered on behalf of the Open Space District on the basis of the Land Trust's remuneration.

"We got derailed by the McCord deal. We got consumed by it. It took all our energy and focus," Schurman said this week. "Because of the way the *PD* came after us, we had to spend a lot of time on it, and what we didn't do was take care of our fundraising, so our contributions were down in 1992."

But donations picked up again in 1993, Schurman says, and the trust's budget finished "well in the black" last year with a $21,000 surplus in a $251,000 budget. Trust membership has increased from 350 to 1,700 with Schurman at the helm, and the trust has put nearly 10,000 acres under permanent protection from development.

Schurman says he plans to remain at the Land Trust through March, assisting in the search for and training of his successor.

—Peter White

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New hurdles for Laguna development

The long-running controversy over the proposed Palm Terrace subdivision overlooking the Laguna de Santa Rosa on Sebastopol's eastern edge opened a new chapter last month, as a scaled-down version of the project was presented to the city Planning Commission.

This latest version of the seven-plus-acre project, first outlined in concept to the commission more than a year ago, calls for the creation of 19 homesites, six of them with second units to be built above detached garages at the rear of those lots. A landscaped extension of Palm Drive would run past the front of the homesites, creating an additional buffer zone between the residences and the Laguna, and pushing the homesites higher and further away from any potential flooding within the Laguna. The lands closest to the Laguna are to be dedicated to public open space, and will include a pedestrian pathway that is to connect with the Joe Rodota Trail, which traverses the Laguna a little to the north of the property. A sizable low-lying portion of the development site would also be part of the open space buffer, and a gazebo for public viewing of the Laguna vista would be built there by the developer.

In the initial examination of the plans by