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OPEN SPACE: Northeast Plan needs public scrutiny

by Guy Wilson

The natives are getting restless over the Northeast Plan. Last Wednesday some 60 locals crowded into the Palm Drive Hospital conference room to hear an informational presentation put on by the Sebastopol Preservation Coalition, which, as its name suggests, has concerns over what will happen to the town if the Northeast Plan as currently drafted actually gets built.

Northeast Plan has been years in the making, but few at last week's meeting knew much about the plan or how it had evolved to this point with so little community awareness of its substantial scope and potential impacts. Hardly anyone knew that Sebastopol had conducted public workshops, issued a draft environmental impact report, and posted numerous notices and documents on the town's web site. While a lot of under-the-public-radar planning has already taken place and a lot of reports and proposals have already been published on-line and on paper, nothing is written in stone. Not yet, at least. Now that the Northeast Plan has reached the public consciousness, scrutiny and controversy are sure to follow, as well they should.

The plan is nothing if not ambitious with its vision of constructing over 300 new housing units along with extensive commercial and city government space; raising height limits to allow for four story buildings in most of the area; reconfiguring street designs and redirecting traffic flow; and adding enough parking at or below street level to accommodate the vehicles that the new development will bring.

Most area residents would agree that the biggest challenges facing Sebastopol are finding ways to decrease traffic, increase affordable housing, preserve our small town character, secure public safety, protect the Laguna, manage water resources, and maintain a stable infrastructure.

Does the Northeast Plan help meet these challenges - or deepen them?

On traffic, it is hard to see how adding some 8,000 plus daily car trips will relieve downtown congestion, even with a new scheme to create better flow.

On affordable housing, most of the new units would be sold at market-rate - priced out of the reach of everyday workers, teachers, civil servants, younger families, and entry-level buyers.

On small town character, it is counter-intuitive to find that an influx of over 1,000 new permanent residents and hundreds more new daily business visitors will do anything other than make us bigger.

On public safety, there will be that much more public to keep safe, and the worst case scenarios are daunting - the area lies in a flood zone and may be prone to liquefaction in an earthquake.

On protecting the Laguna, it is difficult to see how the plan will relieve any existing pressure on the wetlands, let alone do anything to restore them, with such massive new construction going up nearby.

On water resources, it is unclear that our underground water supply can handle the increased demands that the new development would bring. This is a complex question, but according to the Sebastopol Water Information Group (SWIG), which is an alliance of local residents and well-owners headed by a professional geologist, the draft environmental impact report is based on inadequate water supply data and its conclusions are flawed.

On infrastructure, the plan would, of course, require increases in all town services in proportion to the increased population and intensified use of streets, sewers, and public agencies.

None of the foregoing, viewed separately, necessarily represents an insoluble problem. But the cumulative potential impact of the Northeast Plan seems immensely problematic. The key word there is "potential." We should not prejudge - or approve - the Northeast Plan before we know what we are getting into. It is time for everyone to take a much closer look at the Northeast Plan, become informed, get involved, and play a role in determining the future of Sebastopol. - Guy Wilson is a Sonoma West Times & News columnist