



Photo by Paul Wellman

Naples Revised Draft EIR Released; Hearings Ahead

Incoming!

By Ethan Stewart

Thursday, November 29, 2007

Battle stations are being readied this week as the war over the future of Naples—that 485-acre slice of coastal California that sits at the southern gateway to Gaviota—is once again set to resume. After a nearly 15-month wait for the recirculated Draft Environmental Impact Report (DEIR) to be released for public consumption, the massive document hit the streets just before Thanksgiving week, setting the stage for what promises to be a passionate public hearing on the subject in early December.

Sent back to the drawing board last year because of the scope and significance of the project and the sheer volume of the concerns gathered in the original EIR process, the new report—in what Santa Barbara County Planning and Development staffer Tom Figg called an “absolutely rare occurrence”—simultaneously tackles with equal rigor both the original development plan and Naples owner Matt Osgood’s current preferred plan, “Alternative 1.” The former calls for, among other things, 54 luxury homes, an equestrian center, and an employee duplex. The latter looks to join with the neighboring Dos Pueblos Ranch, creating a development that

would build out portions of both properties with as many as 72 large single family homes while also creating some 2,500 acres of open space preserves. Despite Osgood's efforts otherwise, the new DEIR identifies several significant and unmitigatable impacts of the revised plan, ranging from the destruction of pristine views and native habitat to inconsistencies with the county's Comprehensive Land Use Policy.

Admitting this week that he was "still working through" the new DEIR, Osgood—who has had nary an unopposed step toward development since purchasing the land in 1999—remained upbeat about the findings. "We actually encouraged the additional review," he explained. "I wouldn't have spent this much time and money going through this process if I didn't think we were doing the right thing for the land." To that end, the DEIR makes some of its negative findings based on project tweaks—imposed by the Osgood camp, ironically, to prevent such impacts—such as minor shifts in coastal terrace-building footprints, better grasslands protection, an altered roofline for the equestrian center to lessen viewshed impacts, and a fleshing-out of the Open Space Management Plan that would put thousands of acres into some sort of a land trust or agricultural easement. Referencing the upcoming hearing and the disconnect between the project changes and the DEIR findings, Osgood offered, "By no means is this story over."

For their part, the Naples Coalition—an anti-development organization that includes the Gaviota Coast Conservancy, the Surfrider Foundation, and the League of Women Voters—was buoyed by the findings but also discouraged by the process and the now underway 45-day public comment period. Marc Chytilo, the Coalition's lead legal counsel, called the document "a step in the right direction but far from complete," pointing out alleged faults in the plan like coastal access spots, the lack of detail in the Open Space Management Plan, the debatable feasibility of transferring development rights, and the shortcomings of the proposed Naples Planning District. Further frustrating Chytilo is the fact that the new draft document not only throws out the hundreds of public comments amassed during the first round of evaluation, but that it does so without "squarely answering the concerns" of the commenters, as he put it. And with many members of the coalition being college students, the fact that the new DEIR hearing falls on the first day of UCSB finals means that many may not be able to attend. Add to that a comment period that falls over the holidays and you get what Chytilo deemed "pretty much the worst possible scheduling imaginable." After deducting weekends and national holidays, the mandated 45-day public comment period is actually a 32-day affair, he said.

The draft EIR public hearing is scheduled for 6:30 p.m. on 12/10 at the Santa Barbara County Administration Building.