

Proposed substation gets a closer look

City Council members to review proposed creekside facility

By Melissa Daugherty (Chico News And Review)

Can the Butte County Mosquito and Vector Control District be trusted to handle pesticides? Should its new Chico substation, to be located next to a creek, be approved without environmental review?

Those were questions confronting the Chico City Council when it convened, after nearly a month's hiatus, at its regular meeting on Tuesday (Sept. 1). At issue was whether to uphold the Architectural Review Board's conditional approval of the district's planned structure on Otterson Drive, in the Hegan Lane Business Park.

Chicoan Sheldon Praiser, who lives within a few miles of the planned facility, and local environmentalist and Planning Commissioner John Merz appealed the board's approval on a number of conditions and asked for a study of the site. Most of the concerns related to the project's proximity to nearby Comanche Creek, a factor both men insisted makes the project subject to the California Environmental Quality Act.

An exemption under CEQA for infill projects allowed the ARB to approve the design and site plans for the proposed 10,000-square-foot facility without environmental review. However, based on one set of criteria requiring the project to be "substantially surrounded by urban uses," Councilman Andy Holcombe asked whether it had been appropriate to grant the exemption.

"To me, a riparian corridor ... is not a typical use," Holcombe said. "[The project] is not substantially surrounded, in my opinion, by urban uses."

Holcombe's comments followed lengthy discussion—several hours' worth—by council members (except for Mary Flynn, who was absent) and more than a dozen people on both sides of the issue. After hearing from the public, Mayor Ann Schwab said she was left with more questions than answers.

One of the main and much deliberated-upon concerns over the project is the storage of pesticides the vector-control district routinely uses to combat mosquitoes and the spread of West Nile virus, and whether there is any threat of the chemicals leaching into the creek.

British ex-pat Alan Gair warned of the inherent dangers of human error, calling it "insane" that a creekside location could house such chemicals. Karen Laslo echoed him, adding that the public would never know if a spill were to occur. (The district is regulated by other agencies at the state and federal levels, including the Environmental Protection Agency.) What the council has control over, she said, is where and how the facility is built.

Project designer and developer Steve Honeycutt of Chico-based real-estate company Guillon Inc. countered that the activities of the district should not be on trial. He also defended the structural safety of the facility, which includes a concrete-floored chemical-storage room with a raised perimeter curb designed to contain any spills.

"This is a vastly superior project from any perspective," he said, comparing the plan to an existing facility just over 100 yards to the north.

Developer Bill Brouhard, also with Guillon Inc., noted that by delaying the project, the city would make it more expensive and cost jobs to work crews, he said.

Councilmen Tom Nickell and Jim Walker appeared to waver on the issue. At one point Nickell, who repeatedly voiced confidence in the competence of the district, seconded Councilman Larry Wahl's motion to deny the appeal (the move failed, 2-4).

Wahl stressed his concerns over the financial implications associated with approving an appeal he called "scantily relevant to the function of the ARB." In the end, he was the lone dissenter in a vote initiated by Holcombe upholding the appeal and directing staff to conduct an initial study to be brought back at the council level.

Councilman Scott Gruendl appeared most concerned about the physical placement of the chemical-storage room within the building, noting that the roughly 300-foot area is located on the side closest to the creek and farthest from public access. While he acknowledged that studying the impacts of the facility will delay construction—by two to three months, according to city staff—and

increase costs, Gruendl said he felt an even greater responsibility to get more info because the project is receiving \$2.2 million in Redevelopment Agency funding.

"I'm a believer that if we're going to spend public money on a public facility, we'd better get it right," he said.