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City OKs branding study, may relent on Laguna herbicides

Branding study approved quietly after initial outcry, council may relent on using herbicides to rid noxious plant from Laguna

By George Snyder, Sonoma West Times and News

SEBASTOPOL - What had been a controversial idea to find a “brand” for Sebastopol moved quietly forward Tuesday night when the city's Community Development Agency approved an agreement providing \$48,000 to the Sebastopol Area Chamber of Commerce to hire a firm to do just that.

Last night's unanimous vote came in stark contrast to earlier criticism of the branding idea from some residents opposed to the idea, in part because they believed the money would be ill spent considering other needs of the community.

According to the agreement, the city will provide the chamber with \$10,000 in funding and a three-year loan totaling \$38,000 in order to pay for a six-month marketing study of the area to be conducted by North Star Destination Strategies of Nashville, Tenn.

According to Teresa Ramondo, executive director of the Sebastopol Area Chamber of Commerce, the study will be a “community wide effort” to determine what residents and potential customers consider why and where they decide to go to find goods, services, entertainment and other economically important choices.

She said some 300 persons from across a wide swath of the community will be involved in the study.

“This will be a region-wide component for consumers and business,” she said. “This has never been done here before and will result in a unified message to attract more people to the downtown area.”

She said Sebastopol has decided as a business community to be different in the sense that small, individually owned businesses have become a hallmark of the community.

“The study will also help identify what businesses we need and also identify what business actions local residents would like to see,” she added.

The vote followed a recommendation by City Manager Dave Brennan, acting as executive director of the CDA.

“The marketing study will identify what products and services the people aren't getting,”

he said in support of the study. He added that the study would also be useful in marketing Sebastopol to potential businesses that might decide to locate in the city.

The agreement stipulates that all expenses listed in consultant invoices related to consultant time be paid by the CDA with the expectation all payments will be made in a six month period from July to December, payments will max out at \$48,000 and the non-interest bearing loan will be repaid by June 30, 2007.

If it is not repaid at that time, current interest rates will be imposed on outstanding debt.

Pepperweed debate

Meanwhile the vexing problem of how to deal with invasive pepperweed plants in the Laguna de Santa Rosa continued to rear its ugly head with a half-dozen public speakers urging the city council to not use herbicides to control the perennial while at least one council member, Craig Litwin, admitted that the use of herbicides in some fashion might be the only way to corral the noxious weed which pushes out native plants.

Earlier Litwin, and others fearful of transgressing Sebastopol's non-pesticide policy, had resisted the use of chemical sprays in the Laguna, arguing that volunteers pulling the weeds by hand and using cardboard, mowing and other tactics might well prevent the weed's spread.

Tuesday night, however, Litwin said that on-the-ground realities in terms of the plant's ability to proliferate had tempered his opinion.

“This is one of the hardest things I've had to compromise,” Litwin said, “and I have been an opponent of pesticides for a long time ... but I have seen that the volunteer effort is not working. Math is math, I would like for us to develop a more comprehensive plan that includes spraying. I feel we can do it in a way that can be an example for others in the region.”

Litwin said that one of his big fears would be that by allowing the weed to spread because of a total aversion to using toxics might in the long run encourage a greater use of toxic materials by agencies trying to combat the plant.

Councilmember Sam Pierce said that although, like Litwin, he gratefully acknowledged the work done by volunteers last year in trying to rid the Laguna of pepperweed, he agreed some combination of pesticide use might be necessary, particularly if efforts were made to document the success of alternatives in a scientific manner.

Both Pierce and Litwin have formed a pepperweed subcommittee to study the problem and were instructed by Mayor Sarah Glade-Gurney to return, possibly by the next city council meeting, with some potential alternatives.

A half-dozen public speakers, including Magick, and Burnside Road resident Jane

Neilson, expressed opposition to any use of pesticides or herbicides, saying they would be ultimately ineffective and posed a major health risk.