

CONTRA COSTA TIMES

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Water skiers' club contests order to vacate Delta haven

By Kiley Russell

A water skiers' island paradise and its cluster of vacation homes is in trouble with Contra Costa County.

The five-acre Golden Isle in the county's southern Delta has been a haven for vacationers from all over the Bay Area since 1966.

But in February, the county's Building Inspection Department ordered the island's seasonal residents to tear down all 28 cabins and travel trailers they have been living in and to remove the docks they have been using.

The island is zoned for agriculture, which allows the land owner, Golden Gate Water Ski Club, to build one home. The buildings on Golden Isle were constructed without permits by the club's members.

The order is based on hundreds of building code, health, environmental and zoning rule violations, said Carlos Baltodano, the county's chief building inspector.

"The big issue is environmental health. They have unimproved and unpermitted sewage and water systems," Baltodano said. "You can't have this kind of intensive development out there. It's like Discovery Bay. It's like a subdivision, so that's the big deal."

The island is about 13 miles southeast of Byron and just north of Coney Island at the confluence of Old River and the Victoria and North canals. If the island were to flood, its septic systems could damage the Delta's ecosystem and contaminate the state's drinking water, Baltodano said.

The ski club denies that its members are using the land illegally and that their septic systems endanger the Delta.

"What the county doesn't tell you is that the club, for the past 15 years or so, has hired an environmental company to test the waters around the island, and they've found that there is no pollution coming from the island or from the islanders themselves," said Braden Chadwick, the club's lawyer.

Also, state and federal law requires a government agency to enforce their rules within a reasonable amount of time. Because the county waited so long to enforce its rules on Golden Isle, the order to demolish the homes and docks could be reversed in court, Chadwick said.

The island and the county have a history of trying to work out their differences dating back to 1970, when the Planning Department announced that ski club members were violating county zoning. By 1979 the conflict remained unsettled, and the club agreed to form a committee to work out a compromise.

After that, the county seemed to forget about Golden Isle and no committee was ever formed. It was not until 2003 that building inspectors re-discovered the club while investigating problems on nearby Salisbury Island.

By building the weekend getaway, however, the islanders are treading in two separate but equally volatile political mine fields.

First, the county's building inspection department has been actively trying to clean up the Delta for the past few years. Baltodano and his colleagues have already forced more than 40 families to tear down illegal homes on three nearby islands and have two more islands in their sights.

Second, Golden Isle is outside the county's urban limit line, a growth boundary beyond which no large-scale development is allowed.

For much of the past year, county and city officials, environmentalists and developers have been arguing about where to

draw the line. At no time during the hundreds of hours of meetings and debates has anyone suggested that the Delta's islands should support development.

Still, ski club members are expected to show up at the Board of Supervisor's meeting today to appeal the Building Inspection Department's decision.

"I have to be open to the public hearing process, but I think the county's responsibility is to be consistent with the rules and ordinances we have in place," said Supervisor Mary Piepho, whose district includes the island. "I think that's their biggest challenge."