

the reactor

By Paul Azevedo



"Bulldozers scar mountain-sides. Conservationists rally to stop the desecration."

"Biggest, most influential restaurant/motel owner hassles with local environmentalists. They intend to stop his expansion efforts. Local news media give blanket coverage. The whole city chooses up sides. Some say "desecration." Some say, "Let this payroll provider develop his own property."

No, the newspaper isn't the Tribune. The restaurant/motel operator isn't Nick Gust. The roadway involved is not on Montara mountain, and the Pacifica Sportsmen's club is not involved.

IT'S ALL TAKING place in San Luis Obispo. I recently went to that beautiful city (something like Pacifica) to spend a couple of days on the campus of Cal Poly university, to learn a bit more about my job.

I felt like I'd never left home. The cast of characters was right out of Pacifica city hall.

Down there, you'll find a series of volcanic peaks — seven of them in a straight line, starting with Morro Rock at Morro Bay, ending with Cerro San Luis (that's the name if you're a conservationist) at San Luis Obispo.

IF YOU'RE on the other side of the fence, it's Mount Madonna, after the owner, a man named Alex Madonna. He has developed the Madonna Inn, his restaurant motel complex, into the most fantastic Hansel and Gretel gingerbread house you're ever likely to see.

Madonna is a wealthy road contractor. He is trying to put in a road. He calls it a fire road. His enemies say it's a nefarious scheme to develop the mountain.

Pickets, protests, hearings, and complete local TV, radio and newspaper coverage make it the news story of the year in S.L.O.

MADONNA INN, by the way, is world famous. Its admirers would say it's fantastically beautiful. Detractors might call it gaudy, overdone, too much. It's the only motel I've seen where they sell postcards of each room. I was there, unfortunately, when they were sold out of postcards of the men's room. Let me just say that it's hard to use because of the constant stream of women being escorted through to admire its decor. Nick Gust doesn't have that problem, at least.

Visiting from the outside, I was able to be objective, something I can't do in Pacifica where I know and like most of the people on both sides of most local controversies.

I found, even with complete objectivity, that it's not easy to come to a firm, unqualified opinion. Madonna, I could easily say, has the right to use his property without interference. But on the other hand, the public has an undeniable interest in the use that any owner puts his property.

THAT'S WHY we have zoning, animal control laws, subdivisions, planned communities like Fairmont. Each man's self-interest requires an interest in how his neighbor uses his property.

If you allow yourself to be simplistic and dogmatic, the decision is easy. You choose your side, grab your picket sign and march. That sounds easy.

But I can see some justice on both sides. This is why judges get old before their time.

Property owners should have the right to develop their property . . . (But) . . .

All citizens are entitled to have unspoiled, unique scenes of unmatched beauty remain unscarred in perpetuity . . . (But) . . .

What do you think?