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SUPERVISORS APPROVE SPIRIT ROCK MASTER PLAN

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Spirit Rock got what it wanted Tuesday as county supervisors approved a master plan regulating its development. The move came on a 3-0 vote amid staff assurances that doing nothing would be worse for the environment than approving the Buddhist retreat's plan. Supervisors Hal Brown and Susan Adams were absent. County staffers noted that moving ahead with a proposal to relocate structures away from creeks and minimize grading would have less impact on the environment than proceeding with development plans approved in 1988. "It's far superior to what was approved in 1988," said Principal Planner Jeremy Tejirian.

With most major issues hammered out during marathon hearings by the county Planning Commission, the board at the urging of Supervisor Steve Kinsey made one key change, saying approval of a "special event management plan" will be a "ministerial act" by county staff that does not require a public hearing. The commission had voted 6-1 to leave the door open for a public hearing on the management plan, which replaces a strict cap on attendance. A handful of special events over the past 20 years has attracted crowds of up to 1,600. Officials at the 410-acre Woodacre retreat for those who seek Buddhist wisdom have now agreed to limit daily attendance to 791 people, as long as it can hold two special events a year for up to 1,500 people.

Specific regulations regarding resource restrictions, traffic, parking, sanitary, public safety and related crowd issues will be detailed in a "special events management plan" and a "traffic management plan, and each special event would be subject to a county staff review — but no public hearing.

Developer Rob Hart, who asked for a ministerial review of event plans, rather than a public hearing, called the project the "greenest development" ever submitted to the county, and a parade of Spirit Rock boosters rose to give moving testimonials about the benefits of "mindfulness meditation," stress reduction and community education programs. But Jean Berensmeier of the San Geronimo Valley Planning Group said that a retreat that in 1988 pledged visits by just

10,000 people a year instead has grown to attract almost 300,000. She said promises about growth made then were not kept. "This project has been on the master plan track for over 15 years," she said, adding meditation center leaders have delayed action "so they could do what they wanted to do when they wanted to do it." She contended the project wasn't as green as it was painted.

The master plan calls for relocating structures approved in 1988 but never built, eliminating temporary buildings and adding about 6,000 square feet of new construction. The plan would reduce the number of residential retreat and staff units by 21 to a new maximum of 177. In all, the complex would include 142 retreat units, and another 35 for teachers and staff. Some 88 are already built. Currently, an attendance cap of 315 people is in place, but the limit never has been enforced. "I feel very thankful Spirit Rock is in the San Geronimo Valley," Supervisor Kinsey said, calling the program a better, gentler use of the land than a 12-unit subdivision which otherwise could be there. He added that in 14 years as a supervisor, he had not received a single complaint about crowds, noise, traffic or lighting at the center. Supervisor Kate Sears expressed concern about traffic and wondered about posting a traffic light at the entrance and exit to the retreat on Sir Francis Drake Boulevard, but staff explained state regulations made a light there unlikely at best. Vehicles exiting the center will continue turning right on the boulevard, then circle back to head to East Marin.