

Open-space advocates turn in signatures

PETITIONS SEEK BALLOT MEASURE

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After years of debating a housing project that includes affordable senior apartments, Santa Clara City Council members thought they were done last month when they approved the project.

But a small group of activists who want to preserve the land - Santa Clara's last 17 acres of farmland - turned in almost 6,000 signatures Wednesday asking that the issue be put before voters.

"After a lot of work, it feels real good," said Santa Clara resident Joe Sunseri, who helped collect the signatures.

Sunseri and about 30 opponents of the housing project gathered outside City Hall, talking about their concerns and waiting for a count from the city clerk's office.

As of 5 p.m. Wednesday, City Clerk Rod Diridon Jr. said his office had gotten through counting and stamping about half of the two boxes of petitions. If there are enough signatures, the office will send them to Santa Clara County, where they will be validated within a few months.

Supporters need about 3,900 valid signatures from registered Santa Clara voters. They said they got about 300 people who weren't registered to vote to register in order to sign the petition.

Last month, the council voted unanimously with one abstention, to rezone the state-owned land, which for 74 years was home to the University of California agricultural research station known as the Bay Area Research and Extension Center, or BAREC.

The rezoning is intended to allow Palo Alto-based SummerHill Homes to buy 11 acres of the land to build 110 single-family homes. The city plans to buy the rest of the land to help Charities Housing and the Santa Clara Methodist Retirement Foundation develop 160 low-income senior housing units.

But a measure on the ballot could create major delays and cost the city an estimated \$301,678 to \$387,170 for a November election or roughly \$109,321 for a February election.

But opponents of housing on the state-owned land say a vote is needed to allow the public to weigh in because the community loses its ability to shape what happens to public land once it is sold to private groups and developed. Opponents envision seeing the land preserved as open space, such as an educational farm and garden.

Supporters say the project is a textbook example of smart growth principles because it would provide critical housing near malls, major grocery stores and public transit.

"If it goes to the ballot, of course, we'll be out there stating our side of it," said Alice Sutton, executive officer of the Methodist Retirement Foundation. "We've been working on this for more than five years, so we're looking forward to this moving forward."

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