

Former farm site project on ballot

VOTERS WILL DECIDE FATE OF BAREC SITE

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The debate over the fate of Santa Clara's last 17 acres of farmland is about to heat up: The issue of whether to change the zoning of the land to allow housing will be put before voters.

The Santa Clara County registrar's office Wednesday validated the 5,000 signatures that were collected, about 1,000 more than needed. This is a major victory for open space advocates who have been fighting the housing project for more than four years.

Because of the late timing of the signatures combined with the council meeting schedule, the measure will likely be placed on the February ballot and could cost the city up to an estimated \$160,000, said City Clerk Rod Diridon, Jr.

For 74 years, the University of California operated an agricultural research station known as the Bay Area Research and Extension Center, or BAREC, on the land. Last month, the council voted to change the zoning of the state-owned land to allow Palo Alto-based SummerHill Homes to buy 11 acres of the land to build 110 single-family homes and the city to buy the rest to help Charities Housing and the Santa Clara Methodist Retirement Foundation develop 160 low-income senior housing units.

Council members 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. SaveBAREC, a group of opponents, says the community loses its ability to shape what happens to public land once it is sold to private groups and the land should be used as an educational farm or garden.

"For five years, this organization has been trying to open up the conversation to new ideas and the mayor and council members just dug in their heels regardless of what the community said," said SaveBAREC member David Ledesma, who lives in San Jose. "I knew we were on the side of right and as long as we stuck to our vision and stayed united, we were going to win."

The developers of the proposed housing project seemed equally confident.

"While this will delay the project a few months, we're confident the voters will agree with the mayor and council," said Katia Kamangar, a senior vice president and managing director at SummerHill Homes. "The most disturbing aspect of the referendum is that if it is successful, it would overturn the council's approval of 162 affordable housing units for senior citizens."

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