

Santa Clara council approves housing project for its last farmland

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Santa Clara city officials approved a controversial housing project on the city's last 17 acres of farmland early this morning, ending a five-year battle over the fate of the prime real estate - as big as 13 football fields - near several highways and Westfield Valley Fair mall.

The council voted 6 to 0 - with Councilwoman Jamie McLeod abstaining - to rezone the land from agriculture to housing. That will allow Palo Alto-based SummerHill Homes to buy 11 acres of the state-owned land to build 110 single-family homes. The city will buy the remaining land and partner with Charities Housing, a non-profit housing developer, to build 160 units of low-income senior housing. McLeod abstained because of her partner's affiliation with Charities Housing.

With more than 90 people weighing in - mostly open space advocates - the six-hour discussion at Tuesday night's council meeting went into the wee hours today. Supporters of the housing project called it a textbook example of "smart-growth" - building near shopping centers and transit hubs - and said the senior housing is especially important as the valley population ages.

Opponents, who want the former agricultural research station called the Bay Area Research and Extension Center (BAREC) used for a farm or educational garden, outlined the land's role in shaping the Valley's history. They said the presence of dieldrin and arsenic in the soil, after years of pesticide use on the farm, makes the land unsuitable for housing. Very little public land in the valley is undeveloped, they said, adding that once it's in private hands and paved over, it's lost forever.

State representatives defended the development, saying they sent letters about the land to the county and Santa Clara, but only the city expressed interest. City officials said they have budgeted up to \$20 million for the land purchase and to help build the senior housing but the city couldn't afford to buy more of the land.

"I don't want to be too hard on the state. They want to get the most profit they can to spend on state programs that we all use and enjoy," Vice Mayor Will Kennedy said, adding "Certainly there's some regret."

SaveBAREC, a grass-roots coalition of opponents had publicized their cause on Craigslist, urging a "filibuster" on the issue. Despite the vote, they say the battle isn't over. The group submitted stacks of new information last night that city staffers must review to determine if any of it would require the council to reconsider its decision.

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