

# Activists lose battle for Santa Clara's last farmland

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A grass-roots coalition of environmentalists, history buffs and property owners have spent countless hours over the past five years fighting a plan to build housing on the city of Santa Clara's last 17 acres of farmland. They gathered in each others' living rooms to talk, collected signatures at farmers markets and waved signs in front of the property.

Their final "filibuster," publicized on craigslist, failed just past 2 a.m. Wednesday: After a six-hour discussion with more than 90 residents and others weighing in, the council approved rezoning the land from agriculture to housing, ending a five-year battle over the prime real estate - as big as 13 football fields - across from Valley Fair mall.

The council's decision will allow Palo Alto-based SummerHill Homes to buy 11 acres of the land to build 110 single-family homes and the city will buy the rest to help Charities Housing, a non-profit housing group, develop 160 low-income senior housing units.

But the fight is far from over, say opponents, who are spreading the word about collecting signatures for a referendum. They submitted stacks of new information this week that city staffers must review to determine if any of it would require the council to reconsider its decision.

In the late 1880s, the land was used as a home for blind, deaf and autistic children and later for the wives, daughters and mothers of men who died in wars. Since 1928, it was an agricultural research station called the Bay Area Research and Extension Center (BAREC) operated by University of California.

In 2000, the University of California Board of Regents voted to give the land back to the state in exchange for a \$2 million contribution from the state for the university system's Cooperative Extension agriculture program.

Since then, many groups have lobbied for the project, including the Silicon Valley Leadership Group and the Santa Clara County Housing Action Coalition, which sent representatives to the meeting this week.

Shiloh Ballard, from the leadership group, said the group's survey of CEOs said their top impediment to doing business in the valley is the dearth of housing.

"It's a choke point for the economy here," she said.

Bena Chang, from the housing group, said the former BAREC land is a textbook example of smart growth because it is "ideally located near retail and transit, giving future residents choices other than getting in the car."

But perhaps the most dedicated of the groups weighing in has been SaveBAREC, the grass-roots group of opponents that posted the craigslist message urging a "filibuster" on the issue.

"The idea is we need to demonstrate to the politicians that we are not going away until they do the right thing and listen to us, not what big business developers want to do. The way we do this is by keeping the final meeting (this one) from finishing," they wrote.

The conversation stretched past 2 a.m. but council members eventually approved housing by a 6-0 vote, with Jamie McLeod abstaining because of her partner's affiliation with Charities Housing.

That doesn't faze leaders of SaveBAREC, who formed the group more than four years ago with about 15 people. They now have an e-mail list of more than 1,000 people.

At its heart, the fight is about saving public land, said SaveBAREC organizer Kirk Vartan. He said the public has little say on how they want their cities and state to look once public land is sold to private groups.

"There's no doubt that single family housing serves the community, but it does not serve the greatest common good and that's what the state needs to be beholden to from an ideals perspective," he told crowds of people at City Hall.

Vice Mayor Will Kennedy said "there's some regret" about losing the land, but the city doesn't have the ultimate say in what happens to the land because it's owned by the state.

"I don't want to be too hard on the state," Kennedy said. "They want to get the most profit they can to spend on state programs that we all use and enjoy."

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