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Former Council Member Asks SaveBAREC "Where's the Beef?"

By Carolyn Schuk

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Former Santa Clara City Council Member Dave Tobkin wants to know "where's the beef" in SaveBAREC's proposal to turn BAREC, the former UC agricultural research station, into an urban farm similar to Los Altos Hills' Hidden Villa Farm.

The group aims to nix the Santa Clara Gardens development plan approved by the City Council last June. In July, SaveBAREC successfully collected enough signatures to bring the issue to the voters. So in February 2008, Santa Clara residents will be asked to approve or rescind the zoning and planning changes that will pave the way for Santa Clara Gardens.

Tobkin, who served on the Council from 1978 to 1988, has some experience with development projects. During Tobkin's tenure the city built the Convention Center, moved the city's golf course, and expanded the city's electrical utility. Tobkin also chaired the committee that led to Santa Clara purchasing the Great America theme park in the mid-1980s.

These days, however, the CPA can be found at his Forest Ave. office, helping clients with financial and tax accounting services. That's why he's focused on what he says is an absence of financial reality in SaveBAREC's proposal.

"Those signatures [on petitions to bring the BAREC issue to voters] were gathered with a promise that can't be fulfilled," Tobkin says. "When I asked for a copy of the plan, I never received it. I don't believe they have a plan; not a plan that has economic viability."

"When you go to the [SaveBAREC] website they have all these beautiful pictures of farmland," he continues. "That isn't at all what it looks like. It's never been a piece of farmland," says Tobkin. "This property is dirty. I drive by it all the time and the graffiti keeps growing."

SaveBAREC spokesman Kirk Vartan replies that the issue is not replacing Santa Clara Gardens with a different project.

"What the petition talks about is not a educational urban farm -- that's our idea, but that isn't necessarily what has to go there," says Vartan. "All the referendum does is stop the current plan. It doesn't guarantee anything else. That [an urban farm] is one possibility that we know to be economically feasible and sustainable."

"It's been demonstrated in two areas in California -- one locally is UC Santa Cruz's Center for Agroecology," he continues. "The other example is Fairview Gardens in Goleta, CA, a 100+ year-old organic farm, a non-profit on 14.5 acres in an urban setting. "This is the last 17 acres in the city of SC that hasn't been developed. It's a different way to look at it."

The crux of the issue is that the state -- not the city -- owns the land. Further, the state can use the property for any state use without regard to Santa Clara's zoning or land use plans.

Currently SaveBAREC doesn't have financing to buy the land or run the farm. And the state isn't interested in an urban farm. That's the bottom line, says Tobkin. "The state told the city they wanted money for the property because it would help with the deficit."

"There's no way to make that [urban farm] work without money," he says, adding, "Dominic Caserta was talking to them for a couple of years and they never came up with the money."

That adds up to a Catch 22 for opponents of the current plan, says Vartan.

"We can't go to foundations [for funding] because we don't have anything from the city or the state that says we have their support to gather funding to support this concept," he explains. "We went to Dominic Caserta and asked if he could give us six months and ask the City Council to direct our group to get funding. He never took us up on our offer. At one point he was supporting us, he campaigned on it. We

were never given that opportunity to show we could do it by the city or the state."

What worries Tobkin is that if voters agree with SaveBAREC, the ultimate result could be something far different from an urban farm – and worse than the Santa Clara Gardens development plan approved unanimously by the City Council last June. The plan includes 165 affordable senior apartments and 110 market rate homes as well as a three-acre garden and a one-acre public park.

"What's going to happen is the state is going to get impatient and come in," he says. "You could have high rises there – it's a good location for that. From a fiscal responsibility point of view, that would make sense. But instead the city talked to all the parties and you have less density. You have a plan that's well thought out and benefits a lot of people."

Again, Vartan disputes Tobkin's read of the situation. "The reality is that if the zoning doesn't change, the city can't sell it to anyone for any other purpose," he explains.

"The state can develop whatever they want there. That's accurate, but misleading. The reason the state is selling it is because they need the money. To suggest that they're going to put a prison across from the two richest malls in the area is ridiculous. The state can either use the land or sell the land. It can't dictate how the land is used.

Tobin says that SaveBAREC's attempt to derail the Santa Clara Gardens project subverts the community's decision-making process.

"Santa Clara has a process that works with the whole community and tries to get balance," he says. "They're [SaveBAREC] trying to destroy the process. It seemed like they didn't want the public debate."

"We've been encouraging public debate for close to five years," answers Vartan. "It's been fairly one-sided. The reasons we were suggesting rescinding the zoning ordinances is to save the city \$174,000 – it was a fiscal issue. We said that at the June 19 meeting. The City Council is telling the public they're helpless and they're not."

What do you think about BAREC? Write us at scweekly@ix.netcom.com. Carolyn Schuk can be reached at cschuk@earthlink.net.