

Santa Clara zoning dispute begets petition

ACTIVISTS COLLECTING SIGNATURES TO PRESERVE OPEN SPACE

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Almost two weeks after Santa Clara leaders approved rezoning the city's last 17 acres of farmland for housing, activists who want the land preserved as open space started walking around their neighborhoods collecting signatures for a referendum.

"People are tired and fed up with high-density housing and they want to do something about it," said Brian Lowery, who spent about six hours collecting signatures this week.

Lowery and about a dozen others are working feverishly because they have just two weeks to collect the 7,000 signatures required. Making it more difficult is that some of the group's key organizers live in bordering San Jose neighborhoods. Because the land falls under Santa Clara's jurisdiction, those members are precluded from personally collecting signatures.

The council voted unanimously last month to rezone the land, which for 74 years was home to a University of California agricultural research station known as the Bay Area Research and Extension Center, or BAREC. The rezoning will allow Palo Alto-based SummerHill Homes to buy 11 acres of the land to build 110 single-family homes. The city will buy the rest to help Charities Housing, a non-profit housing group, develop 160 low-income senior housing units.

Supporters of the project say it is a classic example of "smart-growth" because the land is close to public transit, several highways and a shopping center. They also say the development will offset the valley's dearth of homes, and provide affordable housing for seniors. SaveBAREC, the group opposing the development, wants the land preserved as an educational farm or garden and its members contend residents have little say about the character of their cities when public land is sold to private groups.

Opponents to the project are pursuing another course besides the referendum. Before the council's vote, SaveBAREC had submitted stacks of new information to the city about the land's historical significance that staff members must now review to determine whether any of it would require the council to reconsider its decision.

But SaveBAREC organizers aren't counting on that; they've collected about 100 signatures so far and they plan to collect more at Santa Clara's farmers market during the next few weekends.

"The city council made their move and, we feel, did not act in the citizens' best interest," said Kirk Vartan, a SaveBAREC organizer. "Our only real recourse as citizens in California is to take control of our own destiny."

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