

Santa Clara's precious open space should be preserved

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The state is promoting the destruction of Silicon Valley's last publicly owned 17 acres of open space. This agricultural land, near the corner of Winchester and Stevens Creek boulevards, across from Westfield's Valley Fair mall, is the former Bay Area Research and Extension Center. It is in imminent danger of being rezoned from agriculture to housing.

On Tuesday, the Santa Clara City Council will decide to either preserve this public land for our children and grandchildren or allow it to be developed. Fortunately, it is still possible to turn the tide. If you attend this meeting and voice your support, you can help keep this precious resource that has contributed to our community since the 1880s from being lost forever.

The process for the sale of this property has been driven by the incorrect assumption that BAREC should be developed into housing based on smart growth principles regarding infill within city limits. However, BAREC is a unique property as it is not privately owned and has agricultural and historical significance.

A broad spectrum of the community has weighed in on BAREC. The Santa Clara Valley Water District wrote that it fully supports the "objective of keeping BAREC in productive open space, and encourages the City of Santa Clara to retain the site for public benefit."

According to Santa Clara Councilman Dominic Caserta, it's in "Santa Clara's best interest long term and for future generations to preserve BAREC in public open space." Currently, there is an 80-acre open space deficiency in San Jose's District 6, and Santa Clara County's District 4 is the only district without a county park. Preservation of BAREC as open space would decrease the deficit in both jurisdictions.

Former California superintendent of public schools Delaine Eastin's comments: "Saving BAREC for agricultural education represents a last chance in this neck of the woods" and "BAREC could be a living laboratory."

Dr. Rachel O'Malley, head of Environmental Studies at San Jose State University, states: "Our department has a growing research and teaching interest in sustainable and urban agriculture and food security but has no dedicated facilities. The BAREC site would be ideal."

BAREC also could support a farm run by the world-famous and award-winning UC Santa Cruz's Agroecology and Sustainable Food System non-profit program. This open-to-the-public urban effort includes: an organic farm, public nutrition, soil health, and organic food programs, the Life Lab K-8 hands-on gardening curriculum, and organic food sales. It would be open to the public every day, all year.

BAREC's former owner, the University of California, returned the land to the state at a time when the importance of urban agriculture wasn't generally recognized. Fortunately, times have changed. At the state level, California has made local food production a priority through the Global Warming Solutions Act, AB32, which reduces carbon dioxide emissions caused by transporting food over long distances. California's first lady, Maria Shriver, has recently begun promoting school-grown food to educate children. In a remarkable turnaround, UC's May-June 2007 alumni magazine devoted its entire issue to urban agriculture.

BAREC's future should reflect this turnaround. The VIVA Foundation, dedicated to urban agriculture in Silicon Valley, believes BAREC should be the center of this movement in Santa Clara Valley because of its history and location. The current situation can be turned from the "perfect disaster" to the "perfect solution."

The solution is for the BAREC site to be purchased at an agricultural fair market price - \$40,000 an acre - using San Jose and Santa Clara city and county open space and foundation funds. A land trust would permanently protect it from development.

The Sierra Club's resolution supporting BAREC as open space states: "For the first time in the history of the Santa Clara Valley, environmentalists, farmers, universities and colleges, historians, the landscape industry, horticulturists, gardeners, neighborhoods, and community activists have come together and are working together to preserve BAREC."

Now we need your support, too. There are so many exciting possibilities for the use of this public space, but we can pursue them only if the zoning of the land remains agricultural. Tuesday's meeting is the first step. Your presence can make a huge difference. It's now or never.

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