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January 7, 2008

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State Favors Development Plan for BAREC

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In February, Santa Clara voters are going to decide whether or not to go forward with the proposed Santa Clara Gardens development project for the former UC Agricultural Research Station (BAREC) on Winchester Blvd.

Because the state of California owns that land, the state's view of the issue is an important part of the equation. By statute, any land that is considered "surplus" -- state-owned real property that the legislature classifies is no longer needed by the State of California -- must be sold at market prices.

Exceptions can be legislated for special uses. One example is State Sen. Elaine Alquist's legislation that allowed the City of Santa Clara to purchase six acres of the BAREC site at below-market prices for affordable senior housing.

When the property was first advertised for public use, other agencies were notified of its availability of the property, according to Beth Mills, Acting Deputy Director of the state Department of General Services.

"No agencies expressed an interest in the property for their use," Mills says in an email. "The State met with the City of Santa Clara to determine what uses the City desired.

"The State considers the site to be an ideal example of an infill location," she continues. "It strongly supports the use of the site for the proposed [Santa Clara Gardens] plan, which will provide an intergenerational and income mix of housing for seniors and families while maximizing the return to the taxpayers of the State of California."

What about returning the land to agricultural use?

"The State strongly supports and contributes to the preservation of important farmland throughout the expansive agricultural regions of the state," Mills says. "This property, however, is far better suited to serve another public policy of providing a housing site in compliance with the City's Housing Element."

So what will happen if voters nix the proposed development? "Given the location of this piece of property, the State fully expects the voters to agree with the unanimous decision of the city council," says Mills.

While the State doesn't have an alternative plan right now, Mills reports, "We have become aware of an increasing demand for well located real property by other state agencies who have expressed a recent interest in the property."

"If the referendum renders the land un-developable, minimizing the return to California taxpayers, it would perhaps prove more valuable for the State to use the site for an alternative use," she adds.

With the high level of toxics in BAREC's soil, one question that has predominated in the civic discussion is the extensive cleanup required for any type of development. The state is underwriting that effort for the Santa Clara Gardens plan.

However, until the land is sold, no development will go forward, says Mills.

"The State would not clean the site of the two contaminants identified in the Remedial Action Workplan of the State Department of Toxic Substances Control until new funding is provided, which currently only exists through a sale of the property."

For more information about BAREC, visit www.ci.santa-clara.ca.us and select "Current Issues" under "City Gov." The Weekly's coverage of the issue is available at www.santaclaraweekly.com.