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Editorial: Yes on A and B: Housing is best use for BAREC site

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Those "No on A and B" signs dotting many lawns in Santa Clara reinforce the conventional wisdom: It's easy to get votes against development.

But voting against the housing plan for the former Bay Area Research and Extension Center, known as BAREC, is a wild leap of faith. The 17 state-owned acres across from Valley Fair are unlikely to remain open space, let alone be transformed into an urban farm, if the Feb. 6 referendum on development is defeated. Instead, the state says it will re-use the land itself. A new DMV facility has been suggested.

Measures A and B ask voters to ratify the plan approved by the city council last spring after more than four years of deliberation and 20 public meetings about the site. It includes 165 affordable senior apartments, 110 market rate homes and a one-acre public park. It's a very good plan. Vote yes on both measures to make it happen.

BAREC was an agricultural testing facility until 2002, when California, short of money then as now, decided to sell the land. It was offered to Santa Clara at a discount, as required by law, but neither Santa Clara nor adjacent San Jose had the money to buy the site for open space.

Santa Clara's general plan has called for

housing on the site for decades. After much public discussion, the Santa Clara City Council adopted guidelines for the kind of project it wanted, and the current plan meets them.

The Save BAREC activists are impassioned and tireless. They forced this referendum, arguing eloquently for an urban farm. Unfortunately, many of their arguments are misleading.

For example, they imply conspiracy because BAREC, a fertilizer and pesticide test site, will have no deed restrictions on the land, while nearby Santana Row has strict limits on land that was just an orchard. It's true - but that's because Santana Row chose to pave over its pesticide-soaked ground, while at BAREC, developers will clean the site to the highest environmental standard.

The A and B opponents claim San Jose hasn't approved access to Winchester Boulevard from the site. Not true. They claim the low-cost one-bedroom senior apartments planned by Charities Housing are not in demand, but similar units in less attractive locations have been snapped up. This project will have its own 2.5-acre garden and be a short walk from a supermarket, a drug store, a bus stop and a park, not to mention Valley Fair.

In addition, open space advocates have no solid plan for developing the land into an urban farm. They have no evidence of the grants they say they could get; many millions of dollars would be needed. Nor do they have the political support to try to force the state to sell the land at a discount.

The urban farming movement has great value in a region struggling for sustainability. But make no mistake: BAREC is an excellent place for housing, which also is in short supply in Silicon Valley. Why else would the average home price be holding steady while the market crashes in other parts of the

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state and country?

Homes surround this site on three sides. The plan is solid. Vote yes on Measures A and B to finally put the BAREC debate to rest.

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