

Farmer urges protection of area's best land

Natural resources take precedence over future 'box stores,' he says

By TRACY L. BARNETT
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WATSONVILLE — If there's anything that Sam Earnshaw cares more about than the future of agriculture in Santa Cruz County, you'd never guess it.

The evidence is everywhere: in the beat-up briefcase that serves as a portable filing cabinet filled with anti-annexation evidence. In the collection of aerial photographs of the Pajaro Valley that he painstakingly pieced together himself to illustrate the magnitude of Watsonville's proposed annexations. In the weariness that often lines his usually cheery, good-natured face.

To Earnshaw, it's a fight to preserve natural resources. And if you give him half a chance, he won't stop until he's convinced you're his ally.

The longtime organic grower has even scaled back his operations to free him up to do more advocacy for preservation of agricultural land. He's still most at home with dirt on his hands, and at meetings he's usually the only speaker without a suit. He was unquestionably the only speaker at a recent Business Council forum who had a gull feather clipped to his clipboard.

Earnshaw graduated from UC Berkeley with a degree in forestry, which he put to work writing environmental impact reports for engineering companies. It was during the heyday of the Clean Water Act, when federal funds flowed as freely as the Pajaro River in February.

But it gradually dawned on him that his work was being used in a way he had never intended: to justify huge water projects that opened up hundreds of acres of land for development. He decided to work instead as field manager for a wastewater reclamation project in Castroville, where he was to meet two of his future loves: agriculture, and his wife-to-be, soil scientist Jo Ann Baumgartner.

"I went from writing reports for the company to moving pipe and applying fertilizer and growing crops," said Earnshaw. "I learned farming from the best farmers in the world — Central Coast farmers. I have seen agriculture from the ground up in a way very few people have."

When the five-year project was over, Earnshaw and Baumgartner started Neptune Farms, got their organic certification and worked their way up to a repertoire of 40 different vegetables and 30 kinds of cut flowers. Earnshaw talks to



scores of growers and farmworkers in his current job as an educator for biological techniques for Community Alliance with Family Farmers.

"The people I talk to don't want the annexation," he said. He's encountered numerous farmworkers who have never heard of the plan, and typically, he says, their reaction is disbelief.

"They are shocked that this community would want to destroy the food-producing soils," said Earnshaw. "But when I talk to them about coming to a city council meeting, they just shake their

heads and say, 'No way. What good will it do?'"

In his flair for the poetic, even the dramatic, Earnshaw sometimes leans on hyperbole.

"Watsonville is going to be attacked by box stores," he predicts, gesturing broadly. He's one of those who believes that the city's scheme to attract industrial employers is doomed to failure because of high land prices and its lack of direct access to a main arterial highway.

"A business person comes to us and says the only way he'll come to us is if we'll give him our best land. We should be saying, 'What

do you mean? You can't have our best land,'" he says. "I hope we can turn this around and all work together to solve our problems."

In the end, Earnshaw says, he'll feel like he's done his job if he can just help people understand the enormity of the decision that's about to be made.

"I don't think people know the value of what they are about to destroy," he says. "The best we can do is let everyone know what they're doing. If they still do it, their children and grandchildren will either thank them ... or curse them."

Farmer Sam Earnshaw adamantly opposes the annexation in Watsonville.

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