

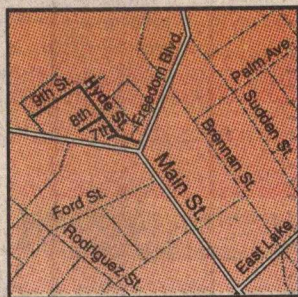
# ✓ 'Nobody wants to pay for it'

## Residents reject tax as neighborhood dies

By CHUCK HILDEBRAND  
Sentinel staff writer

WATSONVILLE — The proposed Hyde Street assessment district is dead, but the problem of how to prevent the withering neighborhood from dying remains.

The City Council voted Tuesday night to stop formation of the assessment district, which would have billed 47 property owners to fund street, sewer and sidewalk repairs. However, those supporting the district and those opposed agree the neighborhood, which straddles a hill just north of the intersection of Freedom Boulevard and Main Street, desperately needs help.



Chris Carothers/Sentinel

"The problem," said Councilman Todd McFarren, "is that nobody wants to pay for it."

And the result is that large-scale improvements are on hold.

The neighborhood is so old that its original nickname — Colache Town — has long since been forgotten.

Colache is a Mexican version of succotash; it's believed the name was intended to reflect the ethnic diversity of the neighborhood, which has homes dating to 1890. Most of the homes there now were built in the 1920s and 1930s, and a few newer apartment buildings are sprinkled in.

Colache Town was not part of the city of Watsonville when most of the homes were built, and the original developers were not held to high standards. The city has been able to do little beyond stop-gap measures to slow the erosion, residents say.

While some of the homes have been maintained, most have not. The streets — Seventh, Eighth, Ninth, and Hyde streets — are so pockmarked they look like Swiss cheese, and sidewalks and gutters, where they exist, are jagged and crumbling. Many of the fences are skeletal and sagging, and paint on many of the wooden houses is faded and peeling. Plywood serves as a walkway in front of several houses.

"It breaks my heart," said assessment-district opponent Mary Ellen Morgan, who said her family has owned property in the area since 1910. "It was a great

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neighborhood when I was a child. It's not safe now."

Morgan was one of the landowners who filed a written protest with the city against the assessment district, which would have charged parcel owners an average of \$9,676 for the improvements. The city had put together a proposal to use city funds and state loans to reduce the assessment to an average of \$7,715 per parcel.

Owners of more than 60 percent of the property in the area protested the plan, saying they shouldn't be forced to pay for the repairs. Only a majority was needed to scuttle the district.

"I had to lower my asking price on one of my houses \$12,000 in case that had passed," said Harold Shaw, who is selling his two houses on Ninth Street. "We can't afford that kind of money. People in Aptos are screaming about a \$20 library tax, so you can imagine how we felt."

After several opponents assailed the City Council on Tuesday for what they called an arbitrary assessment, council members pointed out they pursued establishing the district only after being petitioned to do so by area residents — some of whom may not have understood the financial ramifications.

"It is a bit irritating," said McFarren. "Why do people sign a petition that they don't understand and then blame us for it being on



Dan Coyro/Sentinel

The neighborhood includes a deteriorating 9th Street.

the agenda?"

"We didn't start this thing," said Councilman Tony Campos. "It's evident 60 percent of the people don't want it, so let's dump it."

Shaw said he was approached by supporters and initially liked the proposal, but refused to sign the petition after discovering that property owners — not the city — would be paying for the improvements.

Vice Mayor Parr Eves said the only way large-scale improvements can be made, given the existing economic climate, is through an assessment district.

The council, at the suggestion of City Manager Steve Salomon, approved a resolution that would ensure future assessment districts city funds and state loans that would reduce by as much as 25 percent the property owners' costs,

if the total assessment is less than \$500,000. The city staff had put together such a package for the Hyde Street district.

But City Attorney Luis Hernandez said any abandoned assessment district, such as Colache Town, would need a 6-1 City Council majority vote to be revived within a year.

Councilman Oscar Rios, who sits on the county Transportation Commission, said he would investigate the possibility of the area being eligible for state road-improvement funds.

"But they're limited to sections or types of traffic," he said. "And we're going to keep hearing about safety and health concerns here. There are many alleys and streets in this city that are in terrible shape."