

Planning
1995-2000

Watsonville wetlands targeted for acquisition

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WATSONVILLE — Conservationists throughout the county have named the Watsonville wetlands among their top priorities for acquisition for preservation. Among them is a tract slated for a controversial 1,800-unit housing development.

The so-called Tai property, 646 acres of rolling hills, organic vegetables and wildlife-rich sloughs, has been targeted by the Open Space Alliance, a coalition of 14 environmental groups around the county who seek to raise money for land preservation.

The city of Watsonville wants to annex the property. Annexing this property remains a real possibility, even as the proposal has stalled pending resolution of another annexation.

"It's practically the only wetlands we have," said Mary Tsalis of the Open Space Alliance. "Now that Gray Whale Ranch is preserved, we have several priorities, and this is one of the highest. Our concern is to save a swath of land that would preserve the integrity of the habitat. We can't just do it in patches."

Tsalis said the group is prepared to go after the funding necessary to purchase the property, or at least a conservation easement that would prevent development. The only problem: having a willing seller.

Steve Hixson, who represents developer Vincent Tai, was startled to hear that the property is listed as a top acquisition priority for the environmental coalition.

"This is the first I've heard of it," he said. The company still

plans to go forward with its development proposal. "Ultimately all that wetlands will get preserved and enhanced and made wonderful, whoever participates in it."

Conservationists and biologists are concerned, however, that adding 1,800 homes to the tract will degrade the habitat, one of the largest remaining coastal freshwater wetlands in all of Northern and Central California. Statewide, fewer than 5 percent of the original coastal wetlands remain.

The land's availability to a conservation group will undoubtedly hinge on the decisions made by the Local Agency Formation Commission and the Coastal Commission, which will have the final say on development if the City Council opts to go ahead with the annexation.

The Sierra Club's Mark Massara, a veteran Coastal Commission observer, says getting the plan past the commission will be a long shot.

"The commission's not going to go for that," said Massara. "You get that in front of the commission and no way they're going to convert a farm to 1,800 homes, particularly in a predominantly agricultural area."

The regional Coastal Commission recently completed an analysis that identified preservation of coastal wetlands as one of the area's most critical needs, he noted.

The Open Space Alliance has already approached an adjacent landowner about purchasing a different 46-acre tract adjacent to the Tai property.

Among the other top priorities for preservation named by the Alliance:

- The Glenwood Meadows area, which has been named as a possible site for the new Scotts Valley High School. The developer on the tract, Chuck Keenan, has offered to set aside 141 acres for preservation and nine acres for a developed park. But conservationists are concerned because the developed park, which includes playing fields and other improvements, is slated to go on the more environmentally sensitive east side of Carbonara Creek, as well as the high school and some housing.

"If they put the school where they're proposing, they would wipe out the habitats we're particularly interested in," said Tsalis.

- Buena Vista golf course development, near Vista Point in South County — the area is the site of some of the last remaining coastal chaparral and home to several endangered species, including the long-toed salamander. The develop-

er was to have conducted a survey for the species at the beginning of the last rainy season and failed to do so, meaning that development of the site is at least a year away.

- The Bombay property, one of two remaining tracts in the Santa Cruz Greenbelt that have not been secured for preservation. Currently proposed for a housing development, the tract has one of the most pristine stream channels in the city limits.

The city is currently engaged in negotiations with the property owner to acquire the development rights or the property.

The Open Space Alliance is setting up a land fund for preserving lands around the county. For a donor packet, contact the alliance at 426-2286. Checks should be made payable to the Environmental Council — OSA (Open Space Alliance) land fund and sent to P.O. Box 1769, Santa Cruz, Calif. 95061.



Watsonville Wetlands Watch

Watsonville wetlands, where 1,800 homes are planned, is the top priority of conservationists for purchase.

REFERENCE

WATSONVILLE
SENTINEL
APRIL 22, 1997