

# Farm Bureau fights Polo Grounds plan

By BOB SMITH  
STAFF WRITER

There must be a better place for a regional park than the prime agricultural land known as the Polo Grounds, says the Santa Cruz County Farm Bureau.

Farm Bureau attorney Gerald Bowden told county planners last week that the Farm Bureau opposes the construction of a regional park on the Polo Grounds, now an organic farm.

The protest sets the stage for a new confrontation between the Farm Bureau and the Board of Supervisors over enforcement of the county agricultural land-protection policies — rules that many farmers believe to be applied inconsistently by a county bureaucracy that is ostensibly supposed to be shielding prime farm land from development.

The formal public comment period on the Polo Grounds environmental impact report closed Monday, said Kim Tschantz, deputy environmental coordinator for the county Planning Department.

The comments received will be incorporated in a final EIR and be available to the public Oct. 7, Tschantz said. The county Parks Commission and the Agricultural Policy Advisory Committee will both review it before it goes to the county Planning Commission for

final action, Tschantz said.

The Parks Commission will meet Oct. 21, he said, and the APAC will meet Oct. 24.

Speaking for the Farm Bureau, Bowden said the EIR on the park "fails to meet the minimum standard of adequacy" because the voluminous report didn't examine the project's consistency with the county General Plan's agricultural land-preservation policies, failed to adequately consider alternative sites for the proposed park and contained a defective economic analysis.

If the county applies the same agricultural land-use policies to its own projects as it does for private development, then the EIR "must be found to be inadequate," Bowden said.

Tschantz calls Bowden's assertions "grossly incorrect." He said the county remains committed to preserving commercial agricultural land.

"The fact that the draft EIR was presented to members of the county Agricultural Policy Advisory Committee in September for review and comment shows that the county is following through with its agricultural concerns," Tschantz said. "It shows that the county is following through with its policies."

The county purchased the Polo

Grounds, once the site of an equestrian playground used by sugar magnate Claus Spreckels and his friends, as a park site several years ago.

The park's draft EIR, prepared this summer, said conversion of the agricultural land to a park would have a significant environmental impact that could not be mitigated.

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"The General Plan establishes a number of policies designed to retard the unnecessary conversion of prime agricultural land to urban uses," Bowden said. "The EIR candidly concludes that these county policies cannot be harmonized with the proposed Polo Grounds park. The EIR rationalizes the clear conflict with the General Plan on the dubious ground that 'the proposed use is one that serves the larger community as a

public use.'"

Tschantz, in effect, said the Farm Bureau is mixing apples and oranges. The county zoning and General Plan recognizes two types of agricultural land — commercial agricultural and just plain old agricultural land, Tschantz said. The Polo Grounds, he said, is not designated as commercial agricultural.

"It's designated for agricultural use with a limited factor that won't make it feasible for agricultural production far into the future," Tschantz said. "The General Plan policies say it will be kept in agricultural use until such a time as it is found not to be viable. It is up to the Board of Supervisors and APAC to say when it is not viable for agricultural use."

Bowden said it's wrong for an environmental analysis to set land-

use policies for the county.

"That is the role of the Board of Supervisors," Bowden said. "The larger community is better served by the long-term productive use of agricultural land than by a short-term expedient decision to convert these soils to uses which do not depend on soil quality. The Polo Grounds is currently used for organic farming. That farming can only take place on prime agricultural land. Soil quality is irrelevant to park use."

The Farm Bureau attorney also said that a regional park "could be located on any of 100 available sites in the Midcounty region," but the EIR looks at only two of them — the Porter Sesnon property and the Deer Park site in Rio del Mar.

Many others could be found, he said.

"The O'Neill Ranch is one obvious choice," he said. "The golf range at Highway 1 and State Park or the adjacent greenhouse nursery on Soquel Drive is another. There are many tracts of grazing land between Watsonville and Corralitos which would also serve this use as well or better than the Polo Grounds."

The Farm Bureau letter suggests that the county swap the fertile Polo Grounds for "less valuable farm land with lower quality soil."