

Annexation reaction



Eric Manabe shows his family property off of Kearney Street, between Walker Street and Ohlone Parkway, Friday. Tarmo Hannula/Register-Pajaronian

Manabe family cheers decision

By AMANDA SCHOENBERG
OF THE REGISTER-PAJARONIAN

About half of the year, Eric Manabe parks his car on Kearney Street and fords a virtual lake to get to his 1950s-era pink home surrounded by Watsonville Slough.

"You've got to carry groceries and you're slogging through mud," he said. "And then at night you need a flashlight so you don't fall."

On the left side of a makeshift road to his home, Manabe points out wetlands that have subsumed farmland. Behind another rented home on the property, he looks out on overgrown land unfarmed since the 1980s and the new Las Brisas housing development.

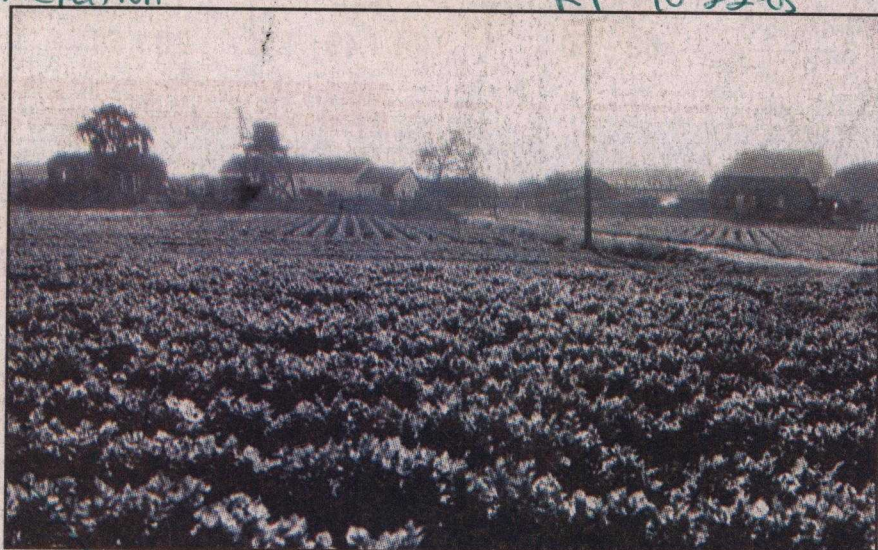
Manabe, a math teacher and girls varsity basketball coach at Aptos High, is the last of his family to reside on the Manabe/Burgstrom property at the center of annexation discussions decades in the making.

This week, Manabe and his family cheered the decision by Santa Cruz Local Agency Formation Commissioners to move toward annexation of the 1905 farm, which once extended up Kearney Street and past Highway 1.

For Manabe, it is gratifying to know his students may end up working jobs on his former property.

"It's fulfilling," he said. "With our property, we can provide the city of Watsonville an opportunity for growth."

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Courtesy of Eric Manabe

This undated photo shows several structures on the Manabe property, including a water tank. The road to the left is the driveway that leads from the end of Ford Street into the property.

Community sounds off on hearing

By AMANDA SCHOENBERG
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The mood at the Action Pajaro Valley Growth Management Strategy Committee meeting early Friday morning was nothing if not jubilant.

The community group met to "debrief" after Wednesday night's decision by the Santa Cruz Local Agency Formation Commission to conditionally approve annexation of the 90-acre Manabe/Burgstrom property.

Commissioners will return for final approval in December after LAFCO attorney Miriam Stomblor reviews deed restrictions on the L-shaped parcel that

prevent development of a big-box store and allow for six acres of workforce housing.

APV Executive Director Lisa Dobbins said the hearing made her proud of Action Pajaro Valley, the community-planning group that crafted the growth-management strategy and helped pass citizen-based initiative Measure U in 2002.

"It was very impressive to see ... how much unity there was," she said. "It was incredible. Kudos to the city and the landowners."

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MANABE

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Annexation has been a long time coming for the family. Neither Manabe nor his cousins Ron, Janice and Barry Manabe are farmers. In fact, the family has leased most of the land to larger farms since the 1980s. The family has owned the property since 1905.

"Ever since we met as a family in the 1980s, we decided that we wouldn't be farmers for the rest of our lives, and we had to diversify our businesses," Manabe said.

Although Manabe's father resisted a 1977 annexation attempt, the family later worked with the city after farming became increasingly difficult due to flooding and urban runoff.

The lower six acres of their property, set aside by a last-minute deed restriction for workforce housing, has flooded for the last 80

years, said Lou Jemison, president of M.F. Farming and husband of Janice Manabe.

Flooding has grown progressively worse over the years. The family once grew row crops twice a year, but by the 1990s the land netted only lettuce once a year.

The family asked the Pajaro Storm Drain Maintenance District, governed by the Santa Cruz County Board of Supervisors, to maintain a drainage ditch in the 1980s. When their requests went unheeded, the family dug ditches themselves and spent \$30,000 on a new system, Jemison said.

"By not maintaining the ditches, you end up increasing wetlands at the price of prime agricultural land," Jemison said. "By doing nothing, you end up with wetlands, but it's not good wetlands."

The Manabe family hired a law firm to get the county to compensate their losses just as the city began plans for wetlands restoration, he said.

"Lawyers versus working with the community — it was a no-brainer," Jemison said.

After the Landmark property was annexed, Jemison said he knew it was only a matter of time before urban runoff from housing developments further affected the farmland.

The deed restriction agreement that paved the way for conditional approval by LAFCO on Wednesday was an easy call for property owners, Jemison said. He said Watsonville would never have agreed to a big-box store on the Manabe/Burgstrom property.

"I was amazed and gratified to see how the community has really come together," Jemison said.

Though it remains to be seen what shape development will take on the property, Eric Manabe said he would like to continue living in his home for the foreseeable future.

"I can hit golf balls and play loud music here," he said with a laugh.