

# Senior community proposed for Polo Grounds

By NANCY BARR  
STAFF WRITER

A unique retirement community has been proposed for the so-called Polo Grounds in Aptos, but it has already had some stumbling blocks placed in its way and has met with strong opposition from its would-be neighbors.

A group called the Ecumenical Housing Council (ECHO) wants to develop the 62-acre parcel with homes for the elderly. The homes would be designed for those who need different levels of care, from those who can be completely self-sufficient to those who need constant nursing supervision.

ECHO was formed several years ago in response to a Santa Cruz County task force report that indicated there was a desperate need for more and better nursing homes in the county. Members of several churches got together and discussed how they could help meet that need, eventually forming ECHO. The group's membership now includes 16 churches, one synagogue, the Seniors Council of Santa Cruz and San Benito Counties and the League for Nursing Home Reform, along with many individual members.

Among the members is Robert Barton, who makes his living as a consultant on

the planning of senior housing. Barton offered to volunteer his services, and has since taken a lead role in planning the project, according to ECHO President Robert Stoessel of Aptos.

The Polo Grounds lies at the end of Polo Drive, a short street immediately east of the Rio del Mar freeway interchange. At the west end of the oblong-shaped parcel are 27 houses along North and South Drives. The rest of the property is surrounded by Valencia Creek and high, tree-covered ridges. The center of the property — about 40 acres — is flat.

ECHO hopes to build 250 townhouses, or "villas," two separate congregate-living complexes with a total of 220 units, a nursing home with 132 beds, a chapel, a community center and a park.

The whole idea of the project, Stoessel said, is to provide homes for people who need different levels of care, so they can continue to live in the same community, even if they are no longer capable of living by themselves.

"This is so he (an elderly person) is not faced with the trauma of being told 'you have to find another place to live,'" Stoessel said.

The congregate-care units, some of which would be set aside for low-income seniors,

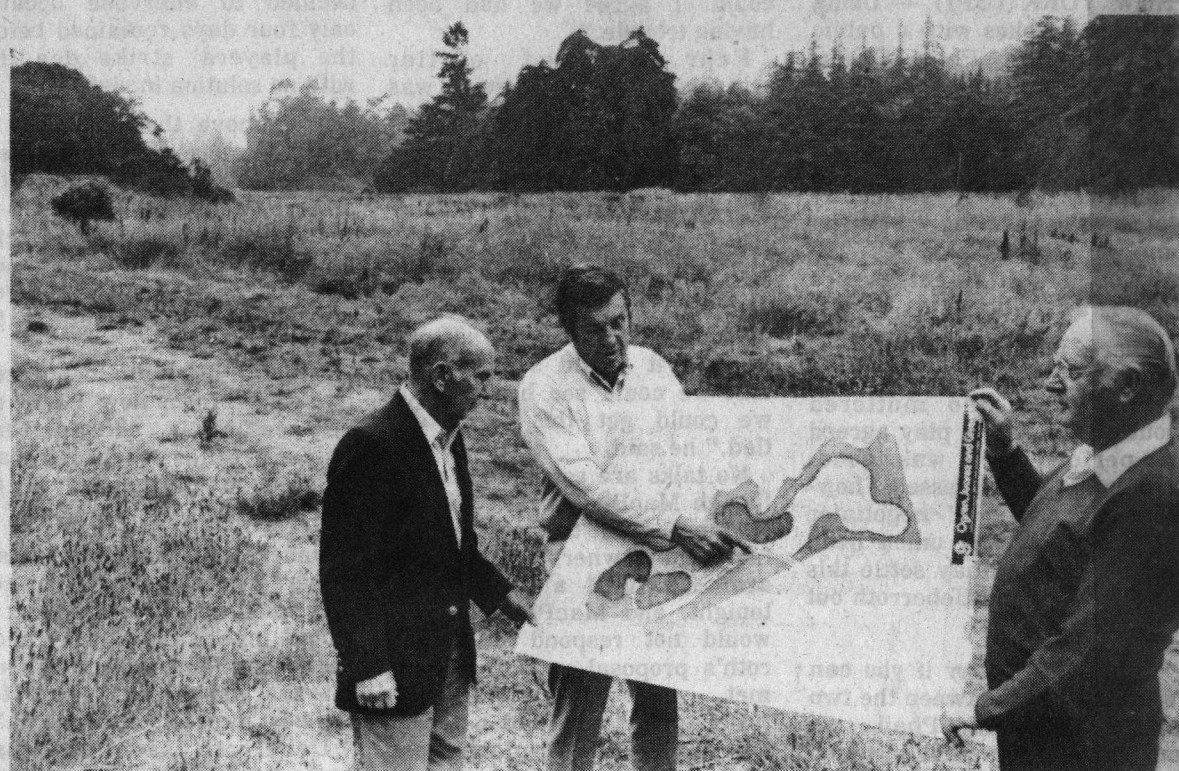
would provide the perfect home for those who don't want to, or can't, live in their own homes, but who don't need to live under the constant nursing supervision of a convalescent home. In congregate care, people live in their own small apartments, but eat all their meals together in a common dining hall, and are offered social programs to participate in.

The financing for the project is expected to come in the forms of traditional loans, low-cost loans and government subsidies, Barton said. "If a project is a good project, there's financing," he said.

The project has already won the support "in concept" of several local groups, including the Aptos Chamber of Commerce and the county Seniors Commission.

"We've had very excellent response when speaking of the project in general," Stoessel said. "When we talked about the proposal in relation to the Polo Grounds, all kinds of stumbling blocks have been placed in our way."

Those stumbling blocks have come in the form of a county commission determining the land should be left in an agriculture designation, and of the Board of Supervisors deciding the Polo Grounds would be a great place to put a community park.



Kurt Ellison

ECHO president Bob Stoessel reviews consultant Bob Barton and group's plans for Polo Grounds with vice president Henry Temme.

WATSONVILLE  
REGISTER-PAJARONIAN  
August 1, 1985

APTOS BRANCH LIBRARY  
275 S. MAIN ST.  
APTOS, CALIFORNIA 95003

REFERENCE





Chris Ring walks with son, Sean, across the fields.

Kurt Ellison

Although ECHO has already included a park in its plans, it has set aside only four acres for the park. County standards require that a "community park" be between 10 and 25 acres. Consultant Barton said that if the county demanded a 25-acre park it would effectively kill the ECHO project.

Supervisor Robley Levy, who represents the area in which the Polo Grounds is located, said she voted for the park designation on the property because the Midcounty needs more parks and this property seems to be an ideal spot for one.

The Polo Grounds could not be turned into a park at all, however, unless it is determined it cannot be used for farming.

The Polo Grounds — called that because many years ago it was used for polo matches — has been owned by Richard and Donna Hunter since 1964 and had been leased for years to a series of growers. The last person to farm the land grew peas and brussels sprouts there, but met with constant complaints from the neighbors.

According to a report on the Polo Grounds agricultural history, prepared by county planner Kim Tschantz, the neighbors complained of contact with herbicides and pesticides used on the crops, particularly when they were sprayed by helicopter, of the noise from the irrigation pump, tractors and crop-dusters and of the dust kicked up when the tractors were used for plowing.

The farmer, Al Rossi, also told Tschantz he lost a great deal of his crop to trespassers who decided to help themselves to the vegetables.

Rossi stopped farming the land in 1977, and the property has been vacant and overgrown in weeds since. Vacant that is, except for the fringes of the property along North and South drives, where several of the neighbors have taken to using small sections of the Polo Grounds for their own personal vegetable gardens, or as a parking lot for their cars and boats.

The question of whether the land can still be farmed is important, because if the county determines it is still "viable" agricultural land, development would be prohibited. Even the county's desire to have a park on the Polo Grounds takes second priority to keeping the land in agriculture.

Neighbors of the Polo Grounds say the land is great for farming and want to see it stay that way.

ECHO recently asked the county's Agricultural Policy Advisory Commission for a

preliminary determination of whether the land is still viable for agriculture — such a determination would have to be made after the project undergoes environmental review — just to get an idea where they stand even before they have submitted their application.

The neighbors asked that the agriculture designation remain on the property and presented the commission with a petition asking that the land be designated for organic agriculture.

That is exactly what the commission did.

The commission agreed with Tschantz that although the land isn't viable for traditional agriculture because of the conflicts with the neighbors caused by the use of pesticides, it can be used for organic farming, and therefore kept it designated as "viable agricultural land."

There seems to be no dispute that the soil quality on the Polo Grounds makes it great for farming, but whether a farmer can make a living there without using pesticides is the debate.

Sherry Mehl, the president of the Santa Cruz County Farm Bureau and the only member of the agricultural commission to vote against the agricultural designation, said she definitely wants good ag lands preserved, but not the Polo Grounds.

"There's no question in my mind that the property may have good soil types, but because of a lot of other factors, shape, red stele (a

fungus in the soil), sunlight patterns, it severely limits the type of crops you could grow," Mehl said.

With the property owner paying almost \$20,000 a year in taxes, Mehl questioned whether a farmer could afford to lease the land for an amount that would cover the taxes and provide the owner a fair return.

John Morris headed the neighbors' efforts to keep the Polo Grounds in agriculture, because, he said, the land has historically been used for farming.

"The neighbors are not anti-Christian, we are not anti-elderly," Morris said. "What we are is pro-agriculture, in the sense that that land is really prime ag land."

Morris also questioned if the Polo Grounds was too far from a hospital and from shopping for a senior housing project.

Morris mentioned one organic farmer who he knew to be seriously interested in leasing the land. But that farmer, Bruce Dau, said that although he would be interested, he has not contacted the property owner because he assumes the owner wouldn't want to lease the land anyway.

As it stands now, the Polo Grounds has been designated for agriculture or for a park. But ECHO is moving ahead with its plans, and expects to submit a formal application to the county, and to try to overcome opposition and obstacles that have surfaced.