

Santa Cruz greenbelt plan draws fire

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A proposed deal that would preserve most of a coveted Santa Cruz greenbelt property in exchange for allowing the landowner limited development appeared unpopular among residents at Tuesday's city council meeting.

The crowd that packed the council chambers for what could be the city's biggest greenbelt preservation move in nearly a decade burst into applause when Councilwoman Celia Scott denounced the proposed compromise. Some expressed their sentiment in signs, such as: "Keep it Green — Stop Greenbelt Development."

Residents who packed the council meeting denounced the compromise, saying the deal affecting 246 acres doesn't provide enough preservation.

"It's a deal, it's not the dream," said Scott, an ardent environmentalist who had helped lead the city's greenbelt fight. "I felt my heart say 'no.'"

At issue is a 246-acre property along Santa Cruz's western edge owned by the Bombay Corp. of Fresno. Boasting spectacular ocean views, stately oaks and watershed habitat along Moore Creek, it has long been coveted by the city for parkland. The council was expected to decide

late Tuesday whether to pursue the deal.

Other council members said they too would like to see the whole property preserved, but said the city cannot afford Bombay's asking price and must consider other options.

"I doubt there's a member on this council who wouldn't like to see it in open space," said Councilman Mike Rotkin. "We don't have \$3.35 million that we could put into this property without

hurting other commitments."

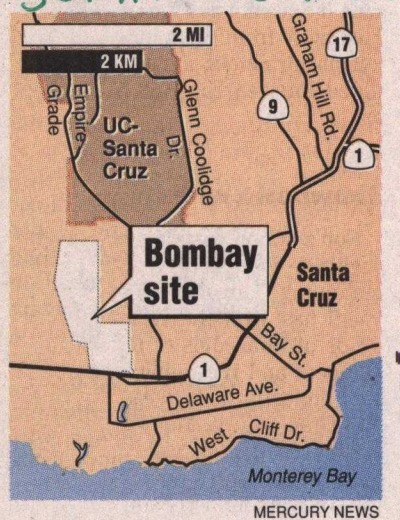
Scott, however, disagreed.

"I do believe resources are there for preserving this land," Scott said.

The proposed deal was hashed out in closed-door legal talks between council members and the Bombay Corp., which has been suing the city over development rights. The council devoted Tuesday's meeting to the proposal to gauge whether there is public support for pursuing the idea.

Under the deal, Bombay would build 15 to 25 homes in a narrow cluster on the lower third of the property. In exchange, Bombay would give 200 acres to a land

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trust to manage as permanent open space. The developer also would give the city a three-acre parcel near Highway 1 to satisfy affordable-housing requirements, allowing the city to build up to 20 low-cost homes there.

Council members said the city could not afford to buy the Bombay land. Though the city appraised the property at \$1.5 million, the company is demanding \$3.35 million.

If the council decides to press ahead with the deal, it still must satisfy environmental review and the California Coastal Commission, and the land trust must secure funding to manage the property. The open-space acreage will not be handed over until the developer has permission to build.

The preserved acreage would not open as a public park. Instead, the Land Trust of Santa Cruz County would manage it under a conservation easement for grazing and wildlife habitat.

Santa Cruz has eyed the Bombay property since the late 1970s as part of a public initiative to surround Santa Cruz with a greenbelt of parkland limiting urban sprawl. The city has acquired most of the targeted greenbelt properties, and the Bombay land is the largest remaining in private hands.

The Bombay Corp. bought the property in 1991 for a reported \$1.5 million and sued the city the following year, challenging the land's agricultural zoning. Last year, the company submitted plans to build 11 luxury homes there. City officials opposed that plan because it would scatter development throughout the property, but said the zoning would allow the company to build at least seven of the homes.

Council members said the proposed deal to cluster development and preserve most of the land as open space would achieve most of the city's greenbelt goals. It would end both the costly legal battle and the threat of losing the whole property to development, they said.

Four years ago, public outcry shot down a similar proposal to allow 10 homes along the property's northeastern edge in exchange for leaving 233 acres as pasture. But council members said that idea failed because it would have put homes in delicate habitat and because the open-space preservation was not guaranteed.