

Developer: people over land

'Enterprise park'
would provide
much-needed jobs

Watsonville — Annexation

By TRACY L. BARNETT

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WATSONVILLE — Fifteen years ago as an environmental studies major at UC Santa Cruz, Owen Lawlor thought the last thing he'd be doing with his degree would be fighting environmentalists over a proposed industrial park.

But now, as a partner in the Greenfarm Ltd. and an owner of a 13.6-acre Riverside Drive parcel, he sees his advocacy for the annexation of the property as anything but a contradiction of the principles he still holds — those of sensible, sustainable, people-oriented development.

But instead of going into architecture or even contracting, Lawlor decided to reach one rung higher on the ladder of his chosen field. He went to Columbia University in New York to get his master's degree in real estate development — again, according to Lawlor, only a continuation of his decision to influence the development process in a healthy, environmentally sound manner. After getting his degree, Lawlor came back to the Bay Area and eventually found his way back to Santa Cruz.

His first project here was to help develop The Farm, an old farmhouse and 12 acres in Soquel. Together with Steve Boysol and Lisa Elliott, the group converted the farmhouse to a restaurant and built a much-needed affordable housing project on the land. Now he's working on a cohousing project on Western Drive in Santa Cruz.

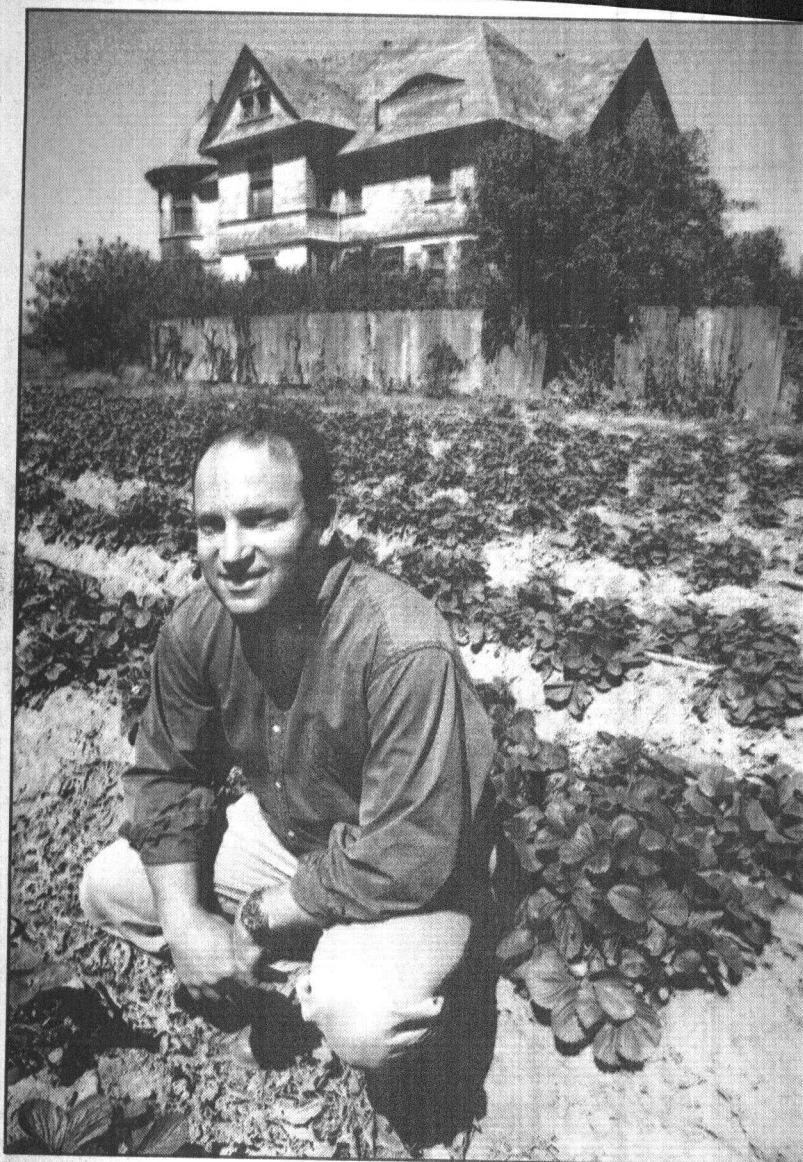
In the beginning, he reasoned that as an environmental developer, "I could integrate everyone's concerns, and everyone would unite around a project."

He paused, with a wry smile. "Then I discovered politics."

Since the Farm days, Lawlor has been involved in a variety of projects, but none of them geared toward the population he sees as needing the most help in Santa Cruz County — the low-income, low-educated Mexican-American community. The industrial park proposed for the Riverside land, of which his little corner is a key component, would help meet that need, he reasons.

He and a group of other investors own the plot on the west side of Highway 1 next to the Chevron station, most notable for the huge, neglected Victorian mansion at its center. Lawlor hopes to find an investor to restore the historic home and use it for a restaurant or some other type of business purpose.

He's still a dreamer, and still considers himself an environmentalist. But he's disturbed by the tendency of some members of that movement to prioritize land over people — a trend that, intentional



Landowner Owen Lawlor hopes for development of his land that includes the Victorian house in the background.

Bill Lovejoy/Sentinel

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— Owen Lawlor

or not, can have racist results — leaving people of color without enough housing or job opportunities.

"I think most people have the best intentions in the world," he said. "But I think there are people who are using (the environmental argument) for their own purposes. Obviously the preservation of farmland is important, but there's more to the story."

Lawlor has another quarrel with preservationists on this particular annexation. Environmentalists like to promote "infill" development, referring to land already within the city limits rather than expanding. To Lawlor, however, this project is infill development; the land is surrounded on all sides by the city limits; and this addition just rounds off an illogical boundary.

He understands the concern that added development will draw workers from outside Watsonville, creating the need for more housing. But with a 20 percent unemployment rate in the city, there is

no shortage of workers here, he notes. And the current Enterprise Zone designation rewards employers handsomely for hiring Watsonville residents.

"If you work carefully at achieving a balance between jobs and housing, and use the tools created by the Enterprise Zone to hire people in Watsonville, you can reach something approaching a steady state," he reasons. "Things are so out of balance now; today is not the time to stop, because of the fact that there's such a crying need in Watsonville."

Despite his own financial stake in the industry, Lawlor isn't big on growth.

"It's very easy for communities like Palo Alto and Mountain View to draw the line — and frankly, they should," he says. "You don't need growth for growth's sake. But this is not growth for growth's sake; this is targeted growth, to help a city on the verge of economic ruin: Watsonville."