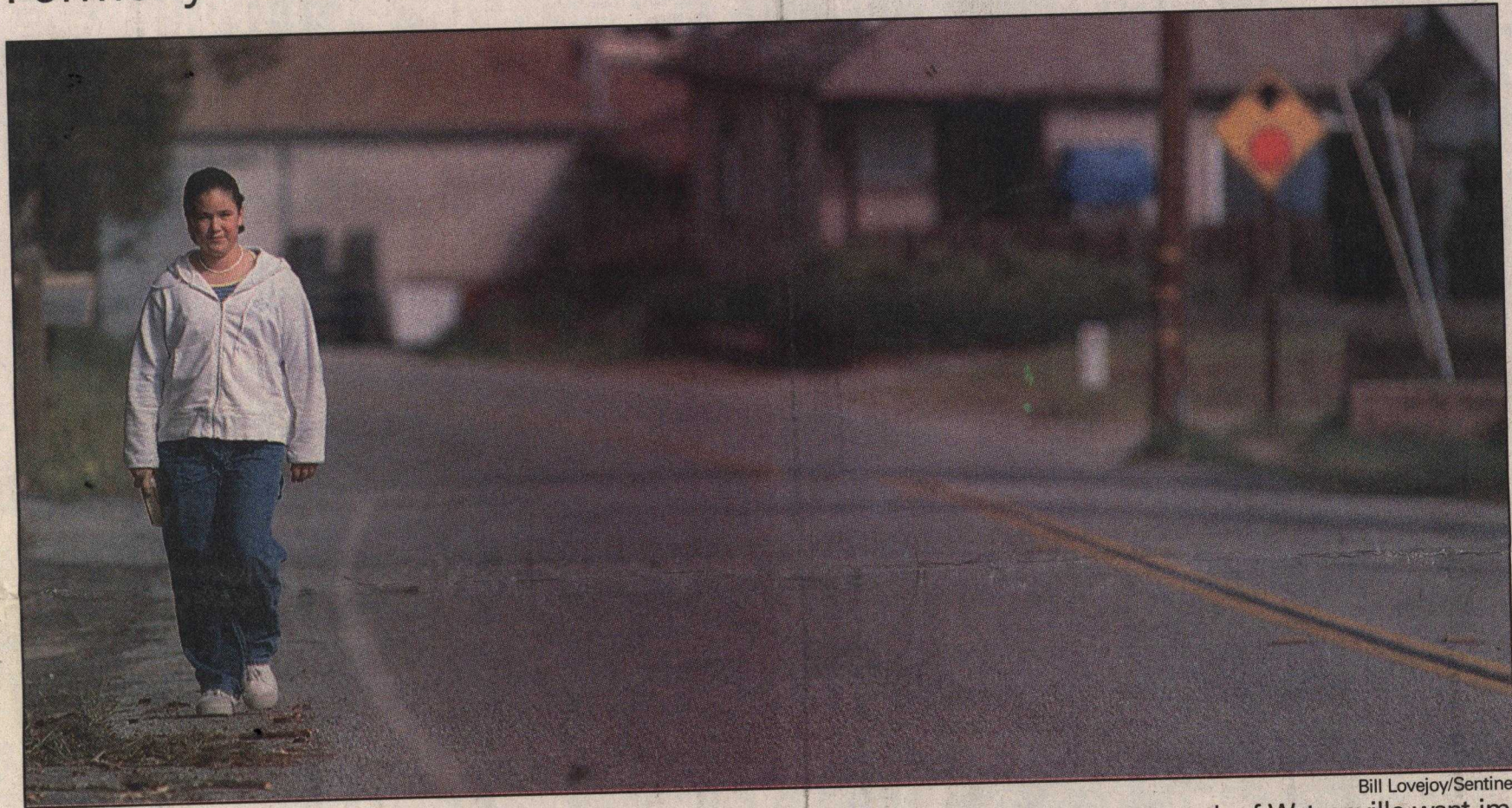


# A crossroads for Corralitos



Dan Coyro/Sentinel

Formerly isolated community hopes to retain its rural character



Bill Lovejoy/Sentinel

Kiley Clifton walks on Hames Road near her Corralitos home. Many residents of the scenic town north of Watsonville want improvements to infrastructure, but not at the expense of ruining its charm.

## County pitches plan to enhance, preserve area

By JONDI GUMZ  
Sentinel staff writer

### CORRALITOS

FOR 40 YEARS, Betty Allen has lived out in "God's country" — a rural community with mustard flowers and a view of the mountains — but she worries how long it will stay that way.

"Without proper land use, you run the risk of spoiling everything else," she said.

The big question is how to make improvements, yet retain the charm and rural character that makes Corralitos so attractive.

It's a question residents began asking in 1988 when they organized to fight DeVor Nurseries, a greenhouse business many felt detracted from the scenery. That led to the formation of the Corralitos Valley Community Council and discussions to develop a plan for the future of the area.

Now, after many delays and setbacks, county planners have put together a detailed document proposing a variety of projects to enhance and preserve the community. The plan will be reviewed at a community meeting Wednesday night, but reaching consensus may not be easy.

"We don't want people telling us what we can and can't do," said Kandy Learn, a lifelong Corralitos resident who lives next door to the landmark Corralitos Market and Sausage Co. in the center of town. Corralitos, which means "little cor-

ral" in Spanish, is a scenic cluster of homes in the midst of rolling hills and apple orchards about 15 miles east of Santa Cruz and five miles north of Watsonville. The area is changing from a farming community to a bedroom community, as people from Silicon Valley looking for relief from super high home prices are willing to pay simply high prices, such as \$700,000 for a Corralitos house with land on the ridges.

"It used to be isolated," said Don Hornbeak, 53, who has lived for 28 years in Eureka Canyon, a 15-minute drive from the market. "No one wanted to live that far out."

Now more than 6,000 people live here, many of them moving into the hills.

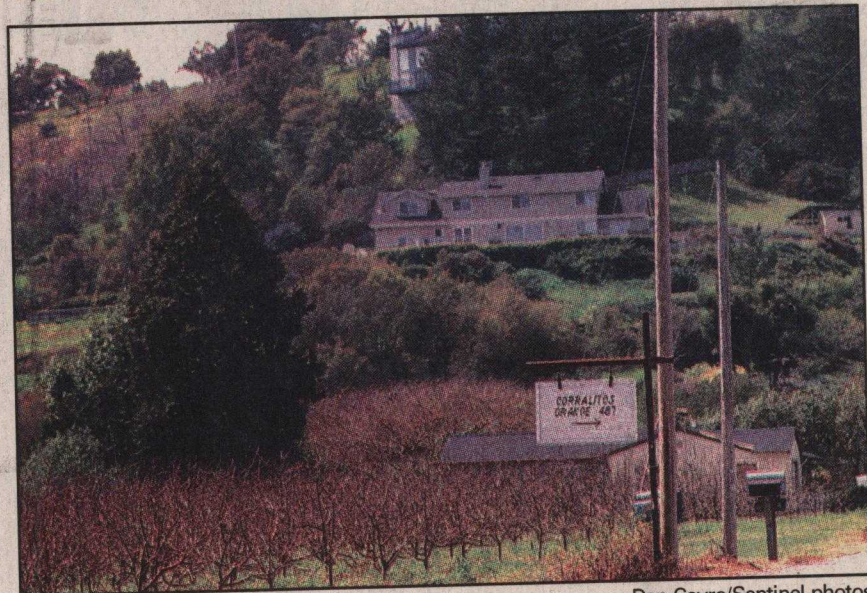
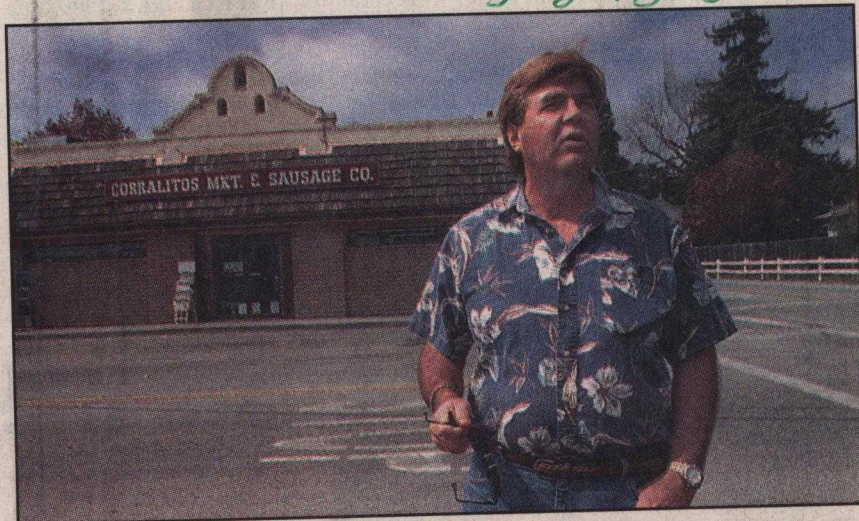
"It's a name location," said real estate agent Paul Bailey. "It's the blend of agriculture and residential that has a nice feeling."

Bailey's company recently sold a 2,200-square-foot house on five acres off Meadow Ridge for \$765,000.

"Two years ago, we never would have gotten this price," Bailey said. "The buyer is a Silicon Valley dot.comer."

Even smaller houses are not cheap. On Hames Road, closer to the town center, a 1,100-square-foot house is on the market for \$299,000.

The town center, so to speak, isn't much more than a crossroads. The Corralitos Market is known worldwide for its smoked sausage. Across from the market is a fountain marked with a plaque for a soldier who died



Dan Coyro/Sentinel photos

**Top:** Les Strnad, vice chairman of the Corralitos Valley Community Council, stands in front of the town center: Corralitos Market. **Above:** Apple orchards, hillside homes and their own historic grange help give Corralitos its rural character.



World War II. It's hard to believe, but behind the chain-link fence topped with barbed wire there used to be a fabulous experimental garden where water-conservation methods were tested on all kinds of plants. The water filtration plant built in 1930 is still operational, run by the city of Watsonville. Nestled in the redwoods next to it are two brick-red buildings used by the Padres, a men's organization, the Corralitos Women's Club, the Boy Scouts, and 4-H Club.

A couple of blocks away, the Grange Hall serves as the place for big town meetings. Next door is a park, built in the past decade with county money and volunteer labor. A few steps away is a former church, which members of the Corralitos Valley Research and Education Association bought and renovated with the help of the Packard Foundation for use as a cultural center.

Corralitos children attend Bradley Elementary School on Corralitos Road.

That's pretty much it — no post office, no shopping center. And that's fine with Lisa Clifton, who moved to Corralitos in 1987 and is raising two children, Kiley and Krey, with her husband Bill.

"We like it the way it is," said Clifton, who enjoys a short commute to work at Aptos Seascape and takes her children to baseball practice and catechism class.

Most of her husband's family lives nearby. Her daughter goes to Bradley school with a cousin, born just 10 days apart.

"It's really neat. They're best friends," Clifton said.

Asked if the community needs more parks or ballfields, Clifton said she didn't think so.

"That's just going to bring more people," she said.

Such a sentiment concerns Les Strnad, 53, who has been working on the Corralitos community plan for a decade.

He's quick to describe himself as a newcomer.

"We've only lived here for 23 years," said Strnad, vice chairman of the Corralitos Valley Community Council and a former deputy district director of the California Coastal Commission.

He lives on Hames Road, where the 1989 earthquake claimed nine homes and delayed the community plan for years.

In his opinion, Corralitos has been neglected by the county, and many improvements are needed.

His top priority is to fix Amesti Road, which has been closed by a massive slide for five years. County officials acknowledge the delay, due partly to a disagreement with state and federal officials over who should pay for repairs. An 18-month study of what's needed to stabilize the land is expected to be completed in April. Then the search for money to do the work will begin.

Because of the slide, about 300 families could be trapped if the Browns Valley Road bridge failed, which has happened three times in the past 30 years. The bridge, which crosses Corralitos Creek, needs to be shored up, but the job requires approval by the state Department of Transportation and state Department of Fish and Game.

Strnad also wants to work with the city of Watsonville to make sure the Corralitos community groups can continue to lease the buildings they built on city property. He also would like to see the water conservation gardens restored, perhaps with the help of volunteers, and do something about the fence that makes the property look like a prison camp.

"Why do we have to look at that?" he asked.

Meanwhile, the city of Watsonville has looked at its 20 acres in Corralitos and considered other possibilities, such as providing recreational programs for Watsonville youth. One proposal is to have the city use the buildings during the week when they sit idle, paying into a fund for upkeep of the property.

"It seems like it was under-utilized," said Carl Johnson, who oversees the water filtration plant for the city.

The biggest change, he said, involves putting up a restroom that



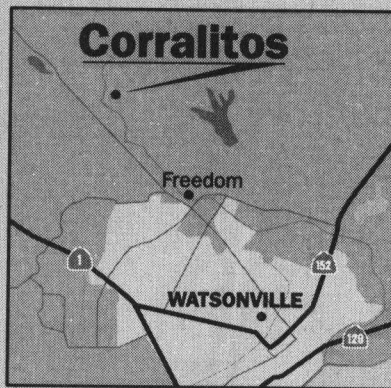
Dan Coyro/Sentinel

The fact that Amesti Road is still unrepaired after five years rankles many Corralitos residents.

## The community plan

A dozen recommendations from the Corralitos community plan:

- Consider designating 24 sites, including the Jensen barn, triangle plaza and Bradley School, as historic resources.
- Study feasibility of restoring gardens at Watsonville filtration plant.
- Write an ordinance to preserve significant trees, such as the redwood grove behind the Corralitos Women's Club.
- Develop a watershed management plan that includes erosion control, logjam removal, water monitoring, creek protection, habitat conservation and oversight of timber harvesting.
- Designate parts of three roads (Hames, Varni and Merk) and the intersection of Freedom Boulevard and Corralitos Road as scenic.
- Petition supervisors for undergrounding utilities and discuss priorities for capital projects.
- Improve safety and beauty of intersection by Corralitos Market.
- Identify roads where speed bumps are needed to slow traffic.
- Limit use of roadside pesticides.
- Develop bicycle staging area and pedestrian paths.
- Discourage subdivision of farmland and keep greenhouses to a minimum.
- Develop a post office, youth center and community resource center with facilities for telecommuters.



capped. Neither of the buildings, which date to the '50s and '60s, meets federal disability guidelines, and the community groups can't afford to make the improvements.

County planner John Akeman is concerned about underground work that might harm the old redwood groves planted as a World War I memorial. But that project wouldn't require county approval.

"The county doesn't have any jurisdiction over what we do," Johnson said.

Johnson, 46, knows the area well. He had his wedding reception at the Corralitos Women's Club. As a youth, he used to sneak onto the property. He concedes the garden hasn't been maintained.

In his opinion, negotiations to renew the lease, which expired in December, are taking longer than expected, and residents have overreacted.

"They think we're going to kick them out," he said. "I think it will work out fine."

Other people who find Corralitos attractive are bicyclists, who enjoy the scenery while training on the steep climb up Hames Road.

Since the visitors could boost the local economy, Akeman suggests providing a place where they could stop and rest. But some residents complain cyclists are rude.

"Some of them are great, but a majority expect too much," said Kandy Learn, who works at the market where cyclists often make a pit stop.

"They get mad because they have to use porta-potties," she said.

The greenhouses on Corralitos Road, part of Rose Gene Technology, remain a sore point.

Just before Christmas, an apple orchard that screened the shiny white buildings from view was torn out.

Betty Allen, who lives down the road from the greenhouses and considers them a waste of agricultural land, was especially dismayed. When county officials approved the greenhouses in 1988, she said, the conditions included leaving the orchard as a buffer.

Stanley Marciel, whose family started the nursery business, said the orchard was old and trees were dying.

"We tried replanting," he said. "What the ground needs is a good rotation. You have to go to crops that pay the taxes."

He said Rose Gene has plans to try to conceal the greenhouses.

In the meantime, flowers have been planted there.

Jess Brown of the county Farm Bureau said he appreciates the effort to preserve agriculture but said designating apple orchards as historic to protect them, as the plan suggests, isn't the way to go.

"You can't mandate that certain things will be grown," he said. "Agriculture has to be able to change to be economically viable."

A right-to-farm ordinance would be a better alternative, he said.

"We've got to educate people," he said. "People come here and

think it's a beautiful area and then a tractor starts up next to their window at 5 a.m."

Dave Jensen, 49, whose family has grown apples since 1900, is sympathetic.

"It's hard to find a niche to keep yourself going," he said.

Jensen likes the idea of supporting agriculture but is skeptical about expanding organic farming and reducing spraying at the same time.

"It would entail more spraying to go organic," he said.

The spray isn't a chemical, but it doesn't last as long, which makes it more labor-intensive, he explained.

He also questions whether there is such a thing as a helping hand from the government.

He hasn't forgotten when the Federal Emergency Management Agency designed a flood-control project for the creek after the flood of 1982. It washed out a year and a half later.

Planner Akeman expects to get an earful when the plan is presented to residents Wednesday. So many issues have arisen.

"We're trying to get a compromise," he said.

He knows some people just want to be left alone, but he hopes they will come to talk about solutions, especially the old-timers.

Florence Wyckoff, a community activist who has lived in Corralitos since 1926, agrees. Despite the controversy, Wyckoff, 95, hasn't given up on fixing the slide, repairing the bridge or protecting the redwoods.

"A lot of good things could happen if we could get our marbles together," she said.

A workshop on the Corralitos community plan will take place from 7-9 p.m. Wednesday at the Corralitos Grange. More information is available from Mark Deming at 454-3183.