

Santa Cruz/Monterey

WATSONVILLE 1990 - Growth SJM 10-19-90 1B Farming, housing interests vie over lot

By Bob Johnson
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A narrow strip of fertile Pajaro Valley farmland that is nearly surrounded by western Watsonville and may be looking at a 900-unit residential development on its northern border is becoming the center of a struggle between agriculture and development.

The controversy may be a test for the more liberal majority of the city council, which was elected last December after campaigning for both affordable housing for earthquake victims and for preservation of agricultural land. The council has already approved rezoning for the first

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phase of the development. Other phases have not yet been presented.

If the Landmark Estates subdivision goes as planned, the back door of the closest home will be about 50 feet from grower Dick Peixoto’s 60 acres of lettuce, celery, and cauliflower. Peixoto can already hear the complaints from his new neighbors.

“People are not going to understand that

we’ve got to work at night to get the fields ready,” said Peixoto, who considers the farm to have some of the valley’s best soil. “I’d like to farm that thing for the next 50 years, it’s an excellent piece of dirt. But I’ll probably just farm it a few years until too many problems develop and then I’ll give it up.”

Watsonville area farmers have contended for years that new developments too

close to the fields leave them vulnerable to trespassers and to complaints about noise, dirt and pesticides.

The Santa Cruz County Farm Bureau has protested the proximity of the development in a letter to Mayor Todd McFarren, saying the farm should be protected by requiring a wider strip of vacant land on the border of the subdivision. The city council already has heard arguments from

the Menabe family, which began farming the land in 1903 and now leases the property to Peixoto.

The developer, J. Lohr Properties of Los Gatos, says the area is prime real estate for the development of homes, and has volunteered to make the first 136 units, which are closest to the farm, low-income apartments.

“We feel it is a very strong market for homes from Santa Cruz, the Monterey Peninsula, and the entire San Francisco Bay Area,” said Richard Wild, a J. Lohr Properties vice president.

The farmers of the Pajaro Valley, however—
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Lot on edge of Watsonville wanted by farmer, builder

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ever, believe the land already makes a great field and they are ready to press the issue. The Farm Bureau board of directors approved a resolution last week calling for a wider buffer between Landmark Estates and Peixoto's field. The farm is bordered on the south by frozen food plants, cold storage facilities, and the trucking firms of Watsonville's cannery district.

"We have asked the city to sit down with the developer, the owner, and the tenant farmer to try to work something out," said Jess Brown, Farm Bureau executive di-

rector. "The county has a 200-foot buffer requirement and we're hoping that with a new council we can work something out."

About two years ago, the farm bureau tried and failed to convince the former city council to strengthen the protection of existing farms from new neighboring developments.

"I don't think Landmark Estates precludes that front land being farmed," McFarren said. "Buffers could be one thing. And designated pathways could keep people from walking through the fields. There are ways to handle the spray-

ing or you could go organic."

But the heavy moisture in the soil of at least one-third of the property makes the farm particularly vulnerable to fungus and mildew, and therefore, inappropriate for organic farming.

"We can only farm it as long as we are aggressive about fumigation. You can't do organic farming on all ground," said Lou Jenison, a Menabe son-in-law who is representing the family in discussions with the city. Jenison managed the farm until the elder Menabe retired in 1987, at the age of 74, and he believes that even with an

expanded buffer the soon-to-be surrounded fields are doomed.

"These people are going to walk from their houses to their jobs in the industrial district or to shop downtown — and they will walk right through the farm," he said. "Those kids don't go to Tahoe to ski every weekend. They play in the neighborhood and the neighborhood happens to be our farm."

The Menabes could have stalled the entire subdivision by protesting the environmental report but decided against jeopardizing low-income housing that is so des-

perately needed in Watsonville.

But when the city council moves to consider the general plan late this year, Jenison said, "I will be very aggressive about moving to annex. The economic impact of the residential development on the Menabes is going to be major and immediate."

McFarren says annexation would allow the Menabes to sell the site to the city.

"We're going to reconsider that whole piece in our general plan update," McFarren said. "A buffer would not really be adequate. That land would make a great park."