

Complex system waxes and wanes

There are five fresh-water sloughs that make up the Watsonville Slough system, all of which eventually converge at Watsonville Slough, which connects to the Pajaro River and the Monterey Bay.

Because sloughs are somewhat seasonal — expanding and contracting with the rainfall — and because defining what is and isn't a slough is a political as well as scientific question, there's some disagreement on exactly where they lie. Some of the ways sloughs are defined include how many days they are covered with water and what types of soils and plants they contain.

The slough system covers approximately 800 acres in South Santa Cruz County.

Harkins Slough is generally considered to reach as far north as Highway 1. It crosses Harkins Slough Road, merges with Watsonville Slough and heads south and west to Watsonville Slough.

Struve Slough, which can be easily seen from Main Street between Green Valley Road and Clifford Avenue, continues on the other side of Main Street and runs under Harkins Slough Road. It has a western branch off Harkins Slough Road on the other side of Highway 1. The eastern arm of Struve Slough lies on the northwestern and central portion of the land where developer Jerome J. Lohr has proposed to build a 900-unit project, The Villages.

Watsonville Slough, a part of which also lies on the Villages parcel, on the southern edge, stretches north and east from the Villages parcel, surfacing near Main Street across from Arthur Road and continuing on the other side in the area of the Portola Heights Mobile Home Park. In some places, the slough is broad and highly vegetated, in others it is channeled and used as an agricultural drainage ditch. It crosses under Highway

1 and runs to the Pajaro River and the bay. At Pajaro Dunes, Watsonville Slough becomes tidal and contains 40 acres of salt marsh.

Hanson Slough, on Harkins Slough Road past Lee Road, and Gallighan Slough, which is near Buena Vista Drive to the west of Harkins Slough, are smaller sloughs.

The quality of the system varies from slough to slough and in different parts of the larger sloughs.

"The upper part of Watsonville Slough is in great shape, over by Lee Road. That's really nice," said biologist John Zentner, who has been hired by property owner Lohr to restore the slough on the Villages property.

Zentner bases his evaluation on what type of vegetation can be found in the different sloughs and the surrounding areas. In his estimation, the best parts of the slough system are surrounded by native grasslands and oaks.

"Much of Struve Slough has been farmed but is not in really bad shape ... the east part of Struve Slough, the part we call Dog Leg Slough, is in pretty bad shape," he said. "The worst is a part of lower Watsonville Slough adjacent to the property that's been put into a drainage ditch."

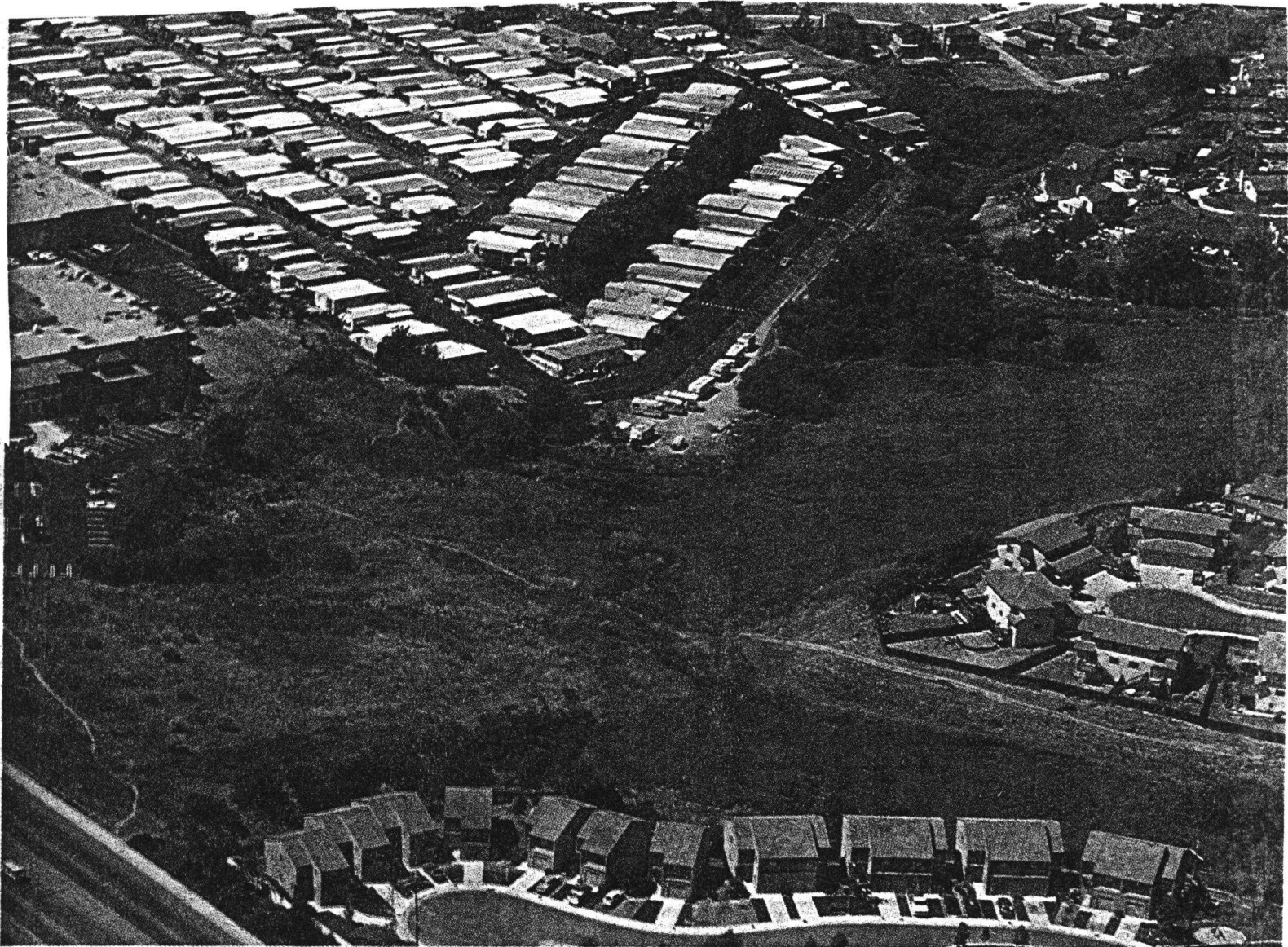
Zentner said there are portions of the slough system that are in good enough shape to be used as models for the restoration Lohr has planned for Dog Leg Slough and the creation of additional wetlands there.

Environmental impact reports, written for projects in the slough areas over the last 20 years, disagree about whether Watsonville or Struve Slough is in better shape.

"Struve Slough is heavily disturbed and severely degraded as evidenced by the limited quantity and diversity of native plants," a consultant in 1978 wrote in a report for the Green Valley Highlands development.

"The potential impacts on the small finger of the Watsonville Slough are considered more significant because the habitat is more diverse and less disturbed than Struve Slough," Environmental Management Consultants of Monterey wrote in a report for the Console/Schwartz property, adjacent to the Lohr property.

—Chela Zabin



Kurt Ellison

Development surrounds much of Struve Slough on the east side of Main Street near Green Valley Road.