

✓ Aptos Park Sparks Controversy

by Dawn Atkins

With the pressures of growth in the county, Aptos residents in the neighborhood around the 62 acre parcel of land known as the Polo Grounds have long wondered and worried about the fate of the land and their community.

In 1987, after years of refuting many proposals for high density development, the land was purchased by the County of Santa Cruz to be developed as a park.

This month, the proposed Polo Grounds Neighborhood/Community Regional Park passed another milestone in the process — with the release of the Final Environment Impact Report (EIR) last Friday, Oct. 11. The EIR evaluates the environmental effects of developing 40 acres of the land, which is currently leased for organic farming, into a public park which will include a community center, playing

fields, picnic areas, nature trails and open space.

The EIR, drafted by Deputy Environmental Coordinator Kim Tschantz of Santa Cruz County Planning Department, found the impact on wildlife, vegetation and the geological concerns to be minimal but found significant and unavoidable adverse impacts for the agricultural interests and the neighborhood.

Neighborhood Comments

"We are in kind of a bowl here. You can hear everything," said Cynthia Kneisly who lives on Polo Drive near the proposed park and wrote a response to the draft EIR. Kneisly has lived in the neighborhood for six years and is worried about the impact the park would have on her family.

"The main entrance would be right in front of our house and we have small children who ride their bikes and play in the yard. We haven't really had to worry before," Kneis-



ly said.

The park site is accessed by Polo Drive, located near the Rio Del Mar Boulevard Exit at Highway 1 and is expected to generate traffic that may be a safety hazard and noise nuisance for the local neighborhood and increase traffic on Highway 1.

Plus, the sizable ball parks for little league, soft-ball, bas-

ketball, tennis, and volleyball are expected to add noise into the now quiet neighborhood.

The report also includes community reaction to the initial draft of the report released last Aug. 1 and the planner's response to these comments. The public had a 52 day period in which to send in responses to the draft.

"There is very little access

in and out of the polo grounds," said Dennis Case, another Polo Drive resident who responded in the EIR. "They are talking about over 300 cars per hour at peak periods [on Polo Drive] which would certainly denigrate the neighborhood."

One element Kneisly and Case both feel will be the largest burden is the little

league fields. "I think it is way too small an area for the noise and traffic the little league will bring in," Kneisly said, "The little leaguers seem dead set on this and that makes me angry because they don't live here. We are the ones who will have to live with it. They will just come here to have fun and then leave."

County Supervisor Robley Levy wrote in support of the park, but said she is concerned with the way the EIR handled the neighborhood issues. "I don't think the document paid enough attention to the means to mitigate impacts on the neighborhood," she said, "It spent a lot of time discussing unrealistic alternatives for which there is absolutely no funding, i.e. the purchase of different land for a park."

Levy actually submitted several alternatives to be studied that would lessen the impact on the neighborhood.

"The neighbors living in that area are legitimately very concerned about its effect on them," she continued, "One of the issues I don't think is adequately explored in the initial EIR is what access makes the most sense. I think that with regard to noise, the plan should be laying out some standards so noise will not be an enormous disturbance to the neighbors."

Levy also feels the report overstated the impact the traffic would have on Highway 1. "They declare that it is a significant impact whereas it only adds 64 trips in the peak hour and the volumes of traffic on Highway 1 is in the thousands," Levy explained.

"Another major area of concern is that the report doesn't adequately discuss the public purposes for which the park was purchased," she said. "What has happened on the Polo Grounds over the years is people have eyed that for commercial development and the county determined there is a real need for regional parks in the mid-county area. We are urbanized and yet we have very little in the way of parks in this area, so we have been making a concerted effort to respond to that need."

So the county purchased the Polo Grounds property to help solve two problems at once Levy explains, "it preserves that property and protects it from substantial intensive development and it also gives us the opportunity to provide significant recreational use of the people in Mid-County and the county as a whole."

Rio Del Mar resident Paul

Carrick also wrote that he was concerned with the use the park would be put to.

"In the EIR there was utterly no consideration given to who would benefit from the park," Carrick said, "Who is going to use it? How many kids are going to play there?"

Carrick said he is an economist and feels the county should be weighing the benefits and costs of the park. He supports the park proposal and feels the neighborhood is taking too narrow a view. "There is a small minority of people who live close to the park and they have been very effective so far in fighting any change in land use for that acreage," Carrick said.

"The EIR doesn't look at all the issues because it isn't suppose to," explained Kim Tschantz, "Many other issues, such as the need for parks in the Aptos area, are not part of the EIR because that is not necessarily an environmental issue."

Agricultural Concerns

Neighbors and little league are not the only people interested in the Polo Park. So is the Farm Bureau and other members of the agricultural community, because another adverse impact addressed in the EIR is the loss of 40 acres of prime agricultural land.

The Farm Bureau sent a letter of concern about the loss of the land for agricultural use. The site is currently leased to Bruce Dau, an organic farmer who produces a variety of vegetable crops on the land.

"It's Class 1 soil," Dau said, "That's the best you can get. That is prime agricultural land and I don't want to see it developed."

Yet Levy said, "I believe they need to look at the issue of agricultural viability in terms of the real costs of that land were it to be used for commercial agricultural use. The discussion on agricultural viability assumes that because there has been a three year use of the land for agricultural production that it is viable, but there had been no agricultural use of that land for many many years. The only reason it has been used in recent years is because the county agreed to do that as an interim use at a very low fee."

Dau contends, however, it is economically viable to farm that land. "I guarantee that if the county put that out to lease people would be lined up around the block to lease it. That is the real test."

Dau also pointed out the economic impact will hit him and his workers hard. "I will lose a third of my productive capacity and I will probably

have to lay off a third of my work force." Yet Dau added his own interest aren't his only concern. "I have a fairly strong philosophical belief that you don't convert agricultural land. It is a national resource, not just a local one. There is only so much of that kind of land anywhere in the world, let alone located in this kind of climate. It is really a unique resource and it is disappearing at an alarming rate."

"I don't feel the county has done adequate research into looking at alternative sites," Dau says, "After all, this is a regional park, it could be located almost any place in the county to meet those regional needs."

Choosing a different place for the park is just what the neighbors want. "Some of the neighbors started a petition to keep the ground the way it is," Kneisly said, "and I signed it."

Kneisly is also concerned that she would rather see a park on the location than a commercial development. "They say there is a catch-22 here that if we oppose the big park then they will just sell it and develop something which is worse," Kneisly said. She would rather see a small park that left out the ball parks and kept some of the farm.

Yet even the project alternatives listed in the EIR do not allow for this option. The report says, "The next most 'superior' alternative is one that reduces the size of the community center and the number of sports fields but does not include farming on the site."

Currently the land is designated by the General Plan as "Agricultural/Urban Reserve." What that means, according to Tschantz, is that the land should remain in agricultural production until the county designates it as no longer viable and then be allowed for urban development such as housing. Yet the plan does allow it to be reclassified for institutional or recreational use even if the land is still viable.

People who want to comment on the agricultural issue will have their chance since the project must come before the County's Agricultural Policy Advisory Commission (APAC). Tschantz noted that, "APAC will look at agricultural viability at their meeting Oct. 24. Then the project will be looked at by the Parks Commission on either Nov. 4 or 11, then considered by the Planning Commission in December and then by the Board of Supervisors."

"This is a case where you have a project that is going to go through more public hearings than a typical project would." □