

Aromas wants a park of its own

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AROMAS — For all the wide open spaces in this rural town of 2,275 people, there's no place for children to play ball, no place that civic-minded organizations can call their own.

George Mortan, a bearded, 47-year-old bear of a man, wants to change that. He's plunked down \$1,000 toward purchase of 17-acre, low-lying parcel of former agricultural land nestled below Aromas Heights on Aromas Road between Blohm Avenue and Carpenteria Road.

"I had a little money in my pocket and a sense of being expansive and helping my community," said Mortan.

Mortan and others would like to see the property become baseball diamonds, soccer-football field, picnic area, basketball-tennis courts and community clubhouse.

The land — owned by a former farmer from Walnut Creek and for sale at \$310,000 — has drainage problems and has been fallow for years. It has a pastoral view of the foothills surrounding the Aromas area, which straddles not one, not two, but three county lines: Santa

'This is too sweet a deal to fail ...'

— George Mortan

Cruz, Monterey and San Benito.

"We are the flea at the end of three dogs," said Mortan, who so far is only \$309,000 short of his fund-raising goal.

In Aromas, pick-up truck salutations come easily, as does gossip. And Mortan, an Oakland refugee and overall-togged "mini-developer" — he resurrects old Victorians and jots his daily calendar in ball-point pen on the back of his hand — has found himself in the middle of a minor back-roads beef over the town's first recreation area.

Just about everybody in Aromas agrees that a community recreation area is a good idea, and that the Aromas Road location is pretty keen, too. The disagreement, replete with furrowed brows at the corner market and curt

commentary in the local newspaper, is about who is best qualified to develop the park.

The local Eagles Club has designs on the property, and a fair amount of development money in its kitty. But national charter prohibits the Eagles from dipping into their building fund for developments they don't own.

The Aromas Service Club, of which Mortan is a member and past president, is also interested, and already collecting donations. So far, it has about \$10,000 in a building fund that could be used, said Mortan.

"I'm trying to make peace and get these groups to pull together," said Mortan.

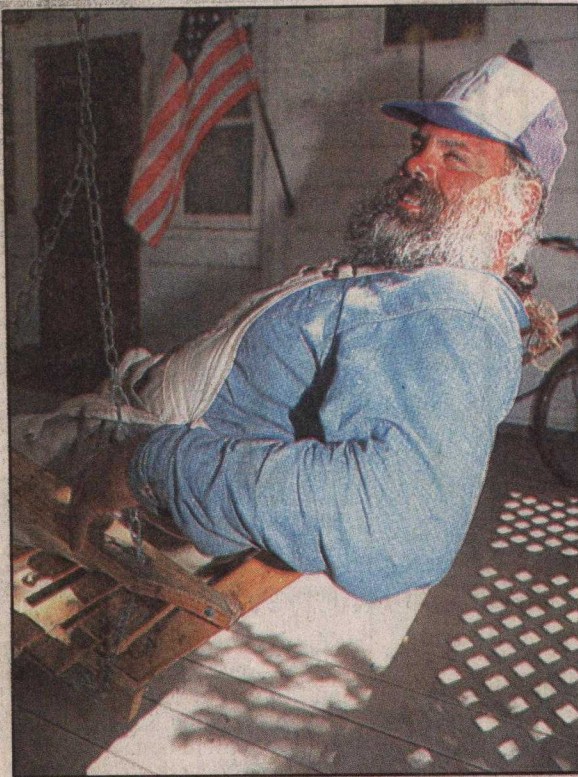
Dave Eddings, president of the local Eagles, sees the community park situation not so much a controversy "as it is bad timing."

The Eagles, said Eddings, have "on the shy side of \$200,000 and some goodwill" to devote to the park project, but are waiting to see what happens with Mortan's offer.

"Until (Mortan) is successful or decides to let the property go back or can make some amica-

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George Mortan, who donated \$1,000 toward purchase of property, finds himself in the middle of a local controversy.



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Aromas

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able arrangement where we can own all or a portion of it, we can't access our building fund," said Eddings.

But the various parties have yet to join forces; a columnist for the Hollister Free Lance, about the closest thing Aromas has to a local paper, urged Mortan to "butt out and let the Eagles take over. Meanwhile, the boys and girls here play all their Little League games on the road.

Mortan also has sought the services of the Trust for Public Land in San Francisco, a national organization that fronts money to community groups to buy recreation space.

The Trust loaned the town \$80,000 to buy its little community square, a piece of property once slated for office-building purgatory. The Service Club and Graniterock later donated \$40,000 each to pay back the Trust.

The Trust, said western regional project manager Michael Joyce, has talked with Mortan but hasn't committed any funds to his project.

"We're certainly supportive of the community efforts to protect the open space resources that are of value to them," said Joyce.

Signs on the property, painted



Shmuel Thaler/Sentinel

George Mortan needs \$310,000 to turn this lot into a park.

by Mortan's neighbor, urge Aromas folks to dig into their pockets to buy the land, and time is of the essence; the use permit for the recreation area and community meeting hall goes before the Monterey County Planning Commission Aug. 11, and escrow closes at the end of August.

The community's annual Aromas Day, a 28-year institution, will be held on or near the property

Aug. 15, and Mortan hopes the homespun event will be a "showcase" for fund-raising.

"This is a good idea. There's no politics involved," said Mortan. "We're looking, generally, for a non-profit (to help). If they give us the money, that's great. If they lend us the money, that's fine, too."

"This is too sweet a deal to fail ... This opportunity will never come again," said Mortan.