

# Conservation group finds itself between rock and a wet place

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WATSONVILLE — Watsonville Wetlands Watch once sued the Pajaro Valley school district over its plans for a new high school west of Highway 1.

But now that an agreement has been reached to build the school — a deal the environmental group says will protect a vast area of wetlands — Wetlands Watch wants out of the lawsuit.

“We are pursuing settlement of the lawsuit as rapidly as possible,” Jerry Busch, president of

Wetlands Watch, said Tuesday. “Maintaining a good relationship with the school district is very important to us.”

Wetlands Watch filed suit against the Pajaro Valley Unified School District in 1997 over the district’s claim in an environmental-impact report that the school site was not prime farmland. California Alliance for Resource Preservation joined Wetlands Watch in the suit.

The district revised the report, but Wetlands Watch and Alliance for Resource Preservation filed

suit against that document, too. The case went to court in 1999, and a Santa Cruz County Superior Court judge ruled in favor of the school district.

The two environmental groups filed an appeal, and the case is set for May 9.

Bill Parkin, attorney for both groups, said while Wetlands Watch wants out, Alliance for Resource Conservation wants to proceed.

Since Parkin filed the appeal, Wetlands Watch participated in several weeks of negotiations

about the high school with school district, Watsonville and state Coastal Commission officials.

The negotiations produced an agreement essentially saying Watsonville would not develop any land west of Highway 1, a promise that helped persuade Wetlands Watch to support the project.

“We are still true to that commitment,” said Jim Van Houten, Wetlands Watch board member.

The Coastal Commission gave the school district conditional site approval in March.

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The Watsonville Wetlands Watch, and President Jerry Busch, above, support the third Pajaro Valley high school, but are a party to a lawsuit on appeal against the proposed wetlands site that begins May 9.