

Casting the Poor Out of the Garden

Betrayal by Santa Cruz City Council tears out the heart of renowned Homeless Garden Project



Homeless workers grow flowers and vegetables for sale in Santa Cruz.



Organic farming techniques were taught to homeless gardeners.

by Becky Johnson

The renowned Homeless Garden Project has been the premier homeless agricultural effort on the Santa Cruz scene since its birth in 1991, and has grown into a model for similar projects across the nation. Hollywood icon Harrison Ford has supported the project, and two Santa Cruz City Councilmembers have served on the board which runs it, the Citizens Committee for the Homeless. Most importantly, the neighbors love it.

Unlike many cases of NIMBY opposition mounted against programs for homeless workers, the Homeless Garden Project was vehemently supported by the Westside residents who shared their neighborhood with the Pelton Street project for the last seven years. But no more.

The property, owned by the City of Santa Cruz since the 1960s, had been leased to the Homeless Garden Project for one dollar a year. Thirteen to 20 homeless workers at a time were trained in organic farming techniques, and grew a wide variety of fruits and vegetables which were sold to private shareholders.

Despite wide public support for the Garden Project, despite the fact that the garden is the only work program for homeless people in Santa Cruz, and despite the inability to locate an alternate site after a diligent search, the City proceeded with a plan to sell the property and use the proceeds to fund other projects.

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Many of those who love the garden and what it stands for watched in shock and disbelief. Don't we only lose when we fail? Wasn't the Homeless Garden a huge success? As public discontent surfaced, the City increased the speed of the property's sale. Last December, as an ad-hoc group called Friends of the Pelton Street Garden circulated petitions on a ballot initiative to designate the land as urban agriculture, Councilmembers Scott Kennedy and Mike Rotkin cut corners to push the sale through, quick!

Advised that a sale of the land in bulk would be quickest, the council decided to do that, even if it meant a substantial loss of revenue to the City. Listed for only two weeks, the land was sold to Pacific Union Homes on February 3.

But that was not quite how it turned out. Four days before escrow cleared, 5300 signatures were filed with the city clerk. Only 3800 were needed to qualify. In spite of the fact that the initiative obviously would qualify for the ballot, the council sold the land anyway.

But the developer was nervous that the initiative would interfere with plans to build 15 luxury homes on the former site of the Garden Project. The Santa Cruz City Council acted to sign an additional development agreement which effectively locked in single-family residential zoning on the 15 lots, leaving only the 16th lot, designated for a tiny children's playground, subject to the initiative's control.

Included in the deal was an offer by the

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City to pay half of any legal fees spent on any court challenges to the sale or the developer's agreement. Even though the land had been sold already, and even though the Planning Commission had previously voted 4-1 against the developer's agreement, the council voted 5-2 to enact the developer's agreement.

Mayor Celia Scott, one of only two dissenting votes, said: "I really don't think the end justifies the means. We need to look at the way we do these things, and whether we allow the people to have a say in a matter that is so important to them. At this point in time, we should have allowed the people to vote, to move forward to have a vote before escrow closed."

Scott also objected to provisions releasing Pacific Union Homes from the requirement to build a certain number of affordable units along with the pricey ones. She said, "This measure I find egregious."

This betrayal of the will of the people is a knife in the heart of the Homeless Garden Project. The Santa Cruz City Council was complicit in closing the Coral Street Open Air Shelter in 1995, thus evicting 200 homeless people, and shutting down an impromptu program at Holy Cross Church in 1996, evicting 60 people, some of them children. Now the councilmembers are proving once again how truly anti-homeless they have become. And for what?

In this case, their flagrant abuse of power, and their apparent haste to beat out the will of the voters, has resulted in a

huge loss of potential revenue from the sale of the Pelton Street property. The City has netted \$2.6 million. But had they sold it lot by lot, or developed it themselves and sold it, they would have realized another \$2.2 million that now will be profit in the pockets of a wealthy developer.

Meanwhile the Homeless Garden Project is a shadow of its former self. No new site is even being discussed.

The Friends of the Pelton Street Garden had crafted an ordinance which would have permanently designated the last large area of undeveloped land in an urban area of the city (excepting Lighthouse Field) for use as urban agriculture, similar to Victory Gardens during World War II, which served as a local source of food during crises.

Speaking against the dozens who spoke passionately to save the Pelton Street property, Councilmember Rotkin pleaded that the city must have money from the sale because it was so hard pressed to deal with its many social programs, adding that "we're the one's who have to balance the budget." However, Councilmember Katherine Beiers debunked Rotkin's claim of poverty by reporting, "We have a savings account with \$4 to \$7 million in it."

Rotkin has successfully engineered the demise of the voter's initiative, and the death of the Pelton Street Garden. Could there be a recall of Councilmember Rotkin this year? We can only hope.