

REMNANT OF UTOPIAN COLONY



MATT SUMNER — Staff

An open lot with two walnut trees in the Weeks Neighborhood of East Palo Alto borders the historic Tan House. Pressure to develop the neighborhood is increasing and its course is uncertain at this time.

E. Palo Alto farm faces threat

City under pressure to develop Weeks site

By Sydney Fisher
STAFF WRITER

EAST PALO ALTO — Just a few blocks from the dilapidated storefronts lining University Avenue, people stroll Green Street under the shade of mature redwood and palm trees. Fields filled with spring flowers, greenhouses and small family farms dot the landscape, and roosters crow in the distance.

All this in the heart of East Palo Alto, a city known more for crime and poverty than for agrarian life.

This 17-block area called the Weeks Neighborhood, nestled between University Avenue, Highway 101, the Baylands and Ravenswood Industrial area, is the last

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East Palo Alto City Councilman

vestige of an early 20th century utopian colony called the Weeks Poultry Colony.

With its motto “One acre and independence,” the 640-acre area that stretched from East Palo Alto to Menlo Park is believed to have been the largest poultry-

growing region in the United States, according to East Palo Alto’s official Web site.

The Weeks colony disappeared by the end of World War II, but the rural feel on these sleepy streets has remained largely unchanged.

The atmosphere may be changing soon, though. There is acute economic pressure to build in the area, especially because the city has to find homes for people displaced by large redevelopment projects.

However, some people are trying to find innovative solutions to save the area from overdevelopment by designating land for community gardens and encouraging a Danish concept called co-housing.

“There are a lot of us who value the semi-rural character of the city,” said Councilman Duane Bay, who lives in the



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Foster Curry, East Palo Alto planning commission chairman, visits a chicken coop in the Weeks Neighborhood where he lives. Curry wants to see development in the area include cohousing and preserve the agricultural ways of the city's past.

Weeks: Sparsely populated area is ideal for developers

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Weeks Neighborhood. "But the area is under a great deal of pressure. It will either be saved or lost within the next five years and certainly within the next 10 years."

William Webster, a leading affordable housing advocate, agreed.

"Ultimately, it's going to be very difficult to hold the line on this unique quasi-agrarian aspect of this land," he said.

The threat is clear.

Already some of the land is being developed. One builder paved over an entire acre on Henry Court and put up expensive single-family homes.

And the city has to find housing for an estimated 200 residents who have been displaced by three large redevelopment projects. The Weeks neighborhood, which has 2,500 residents or 10 percent of the city's population, would be a logical place to relocate those people.

In the spring of 1997, Trevor Burrowes of the East Palo Alto Historical and Agricultural Society, along with

community residents, published the "Weeks Neighborhood Plan." The 60-page document proposed guidelines to "maintain and enhance the neighborhood's quality of life and community character, preserve agriculture and gardening, and provide new housing."

The report, which seems to have been widely praised by residents and public officials alike, has been shelved while city leaders deal with more pressing issues, Bay said.

Foster Curry, a Weeks Neighborhood resident and chairman of the planning commission, said he and the people he lives with would like to try developing their plot using cohousing.

Cohousing, a 30-year-old Danish living idea designed to foster community without sacrificing privacy, has grown more popular over the last decade but has been slow to catch on in The County. In cohousing, residents own their own homes, but share activities like child care and recreation.

"We're interested in building cohousing, which

would be a main building and smaller ancillary buildings that could support 18 to 24 people per acre and be less intensively developed," Curry said.

But for some, even that much development is too much.

Weeks resident Cornelia Fletcher recently bought one of the remaining vacant acre plots on Green Street. Besides building a small house on the property and preserving a pair of 30-foot walnut trees, the Stanford University-educated landscaper said she plans to use the rest of the land as an agricultural school or for animal husbandry classes.

"I'd like it if people weren't totally disconnected with land and the environment," she said. "Having it where people can visit it easily is important to me."

Fletcher said she hopes to create a tract of open space by somehow joining property with a neighbor who keeps farm animals. She also said an environmental organization may buy an adjoining piece of land, saving the land one acre at a time.