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Cleanup begins on Santa Clara's BAREC farmland for housing development

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After more than a decade of controversy, a tractor rumbled across Santa Clara's last piece of farmland on Monday, preparing the former 17-acre agricultural research site next to Valley Fair mall for a huge housing project.

Just how much SummerHill Homes of Palo Alto is actually paying for the property, previously negotiated at \$34 million, appears uncertain as neither the company nor the state, which owns the property, will disclose the terms of the deal. Last summer, SummerHill President Robert Freed said he was renegotiating the sales price in light of declining real estate values.

Neighbors lost their years-long effort to stop the housing project, hoping instead that the property — one of the last patches of Silicon Valley's agricultural roots — become some kind of community park or sustainable farm. But today, they plan to complain to the Santa Clara City Council that even the cleanup effort is tainted.

"Of course we don't want the development there, but besides all that, from a cleanup perspective, we want to make sure it's done cleanly and safely," said Kirk Vartan, a neighbor who has been fighting development there since 2003. "And so far they're

ignoring their existing processes already."

John Azevedo, another neighbor whose yard backs up to the site, said he watched a tractor Monday mowing the weeds without a water truck to keep the pesticide-filled dust down.

"It was really windy," Azevedo said. "There's supposed to be some kind of water there."

Jeffrey Young, a spokesman for the California Department of General Services that is supervising the cleanup, said water trucks are only used when necessary, such as in the fall when the ground is especially dry.

"We're doing everything within our power to do this work correctly," Young said. "It's not like we're doing some quick fix here."

The fenced-in property on Winchester Boulevard known as the Bay Area Research and Extension Center, or BAREC, was an agricultural station for decades operated by the University of California that tested pesticides. The soil there is contaminated by naturally-occurring arsenic and man-made dieldrin pesticide that must be removed before the sale is completed.

Over the next several weeks, the state will build fences, cover them with dust cloths, and then beginning May 6 remove some 6,000 acre-feet of soil from the central part of the property. Air monitoring devices will be installed to make sure work is stopped if wind directions would blow dust into the neighborhoods or if contamination levels get too high. Old buildings will be demolished.

SummerHill Homes of Palo Alto agreed to pay \$34 million to buy 11 acres for 110 single-family

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homes and a one-acre park. The city of Santa Clara agreed to pay \$10 million for the remaining six acres for the nonprofit Charities Housing to build two five-story towers that will be used as low-

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income senior rental housing.


The property is in escrow and the deal is expected to close when the cleanup is complete sometime this summer. Young said Monday he could not disclose the terms of the sale, but acknowledged he was aware of SummerHill's desire to renegotiate.

"As far as I know there hasn't been a renegotiation," Young said. "At this point, we're proceeding."

Katia Kamangar, SummerHill's project manager, would only say they are under contract for the property and expect to close the deal later this summer.

"Given the project has a long history," she said, "I'm excited about the opportunity to finally build homes on this land in Santa Clara."

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