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Hillside neighbors fight to preserve land

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Alan Lopez

Times Staff Writer

Caption: PHOTO: MARTIE CONNER is among the El Cerrito residents who oppose building on one of the last undeveloped parcels in the city. (Sherry LaVars/ Times); GRAPHIC: "Proposed development." (Times)

Residents living around a steep hillside off Cutting Boulevard in the El Cerrito hills are fighting an effort to build new homes on one of the last undeveloped parcels in the city.

The 13-acre property, which sits adjacent to the 79.3-acre El Cerrito Hillside Natural area, is in escrow, with the sale scheduled to close June 24, El Cerrito developer **Aaron Vitale** said.

The opposition can be seen on homes around the area with signs urging "No Development." Nearby on the hillside, tall grass sways in the breeze while the brown ears of two deer poke through the greenery.

"It's the last and largest remaining undeveloped parcel in El Cerrito," said Lynn Huntsinger, a member of the newly formed El Cerrito Hillside Neighborhood Organization.

The land, which offers sweeping views of the Bay, from Albany Hill to the Richmond-San Rafael Bridge, is also home to hawks, coyotes and other wildlife, as well as two small creeks.

About half of the area consists of fill or is in a high-risk landslide zone, meaning it moves a few inches or feet a year depending on how much rain falls, said Alan Kropp, a Berkeley geo-technical engineer hired by the potential buyer to assess the land.

The developer could build on the slide area, though it could be costly, Kropp said.

An environmental report likely would be required if and when a project application is submitted to the city.

"The fact is the site is very buildable," Vitale said. "What we do with the site will largely depend on how (the environmental impact report) comes out."

Emeryville resident Anne Koenig is in escrow to purchase the property. She refused to comment and referred questions to Dan Winters, the president of real estate finance firm Evolution Partners.

Winters said an effort will be made to use "green" architectural concepts that will make the project a showcase for the nation.

He said the area was zoned for 60 homes but neither he nor Vitale would say how many homes they want to build.

Residents say they believed Vitale wanted to build as many as 30 homes.

They worry about the effect of the new homes in the area, as Vitale has built large homes on small lots near Arlington Boulevard in El Cerrito.

Resident Martie Conner also was not swayed by the prospect of green architecture.

"It's already green," she said.

The Sierra Club also opposes development because of the resulting loss of open space and wildlife habitat, said Norman La Force, a former El Cerrito mayor and chairman of the Sierra Club's West Contra Costa chapter.

The prospect of seeing those homes built has brought strong objections from the local community. There is talk of raising money to purchase the land for conservation.

Conner said as many as 70 people have attended recent hillside meetings, and the group also has a Yahoo e-mail list. The organization also plans to make a showing at the city's annual Fourth of July event.

"We would like to stop that (sale) from happening," Conner said. "We would like to point out that the development of the hillside has a lot of opposition, and will be expensive to develop because of that opposition."

Reach Alan Lopez

at 510-243-3578 or e-mail alopez1@cctimes.com.

MORE INFO:

The ElCerritoHillside Yahoo discussion group can be accessed at www.yahoo.com. The El Cerrito Hillside Organization Web site is www.echopenspace.org.