

A sign from a south Eugene neighborhood group encourages efforts to stop an open area from being developed.



URBAN GROWTH

# DEVELOPMENT VS. A MEADOW

Neighbors hope to find funds to buy it, but the effort raises policy questions



Brian Davitt / The Register-Guard

Debbie Summers and children from Seedlings Preschool frolic in "Madison Street Meadow," which fund-raisers are trying to save from development.

## To build or not?

Neighbors want to buy and preserve 2 acres of undeveloped land in south Eugene.



STATISTICS BARROW / The Register-Guard

By SCOTT MAREN  
The Register-Guard

**A**n effort by a group of south Eugene residents to prevent a 2-acre lot from being turned into more houses underscores how the city's growth policies sometimes clash.

Dozens of Friendly Acres Neighborhood residents have put up yard signs and money in support of saving Madison Street Meadow, the name they've given the undeveloped land at Madison and West 22nd Avenue.

The group is trying to raise about \$220,000 this year to buy and preserve it as urban open space—a place where neighbors can walk their dogs and watch their children play under filbert, cherry, oak and cedar trees.

"For the kids this is a great place to keep open for their creativity," said Debbie Summers, who operates the Seedlings Preschool next door on Monroe Street.

"Parks dictate the type of play to happen, and this is such an open-ended space to play. We just don't have that in our city anymore."

Protecting open, natural areas is consistent with growth management policies adopted by the City Council in 1998. But those policies also call for increasing density, using existing vacant land more efficiently and avoiding urban sprawl.

By opposing "infill" development opportunities within the city, residents may help push more construction to the edges of Eugene, inadvertently promoting loss of farm or forest land and adding to overall traffic congestion.

"We understand the infill situation very well. We don't want to see sprawl either," said Craig Haines, a contractor and spokesman for the nonprofit group wanting to buy the Madison property. "We have a chance here to save a quality of life for this city."

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# Meadow: Neighborhood already home to several parks

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That's basically our vision."

Haines said many people living near the property don't want to see it become high-density housing that might appeal to short-term renters rather than long-term owners. That's what developers typically do with infill projects, he argued.

"Basically you're turning the core of the city into a ghetto," he said. "Look at the West University neighborhood. Walk down those alleys and see what kind of neighborhoods they have there. Basically the owners don't live there anymore."

The Madison property is owned by Paul Niedermeyer, who lives nearby and bought the land six months ago after residents learned the previous owner had planned to sell it, opening it for dense development of up to 18 homes.

Niedermeyer said he bought the land to give the neighborhood more time — till the end of the year — to raise money to buy it themselves. In addition to about \$220,000 this year, the group would need to raise another \$220,000 to \$250,000 by the end of 2007 to complete the purchase.

If they fall short, he plans to offer it for individual home development on scale with the original "fabric and feeling" of the neighborhood: eight lots of about 9,000 square feet each.

Niedermeyer said he thinks it's fine if the group reaches its ambitious fund-raising goal, but he questions whether it's worth nearly half a million dollars to keep less than 2 acres vacant in a part of Eugene not wanting for parkland.

The 5½-acre Washington Park is two blocks away and the 48-acre Westmoreland Park is about six blocks to the west. Fields and playgrounds are available at nearby Adams and O'Hara schools, and the city plans to redevelop the small Friendly Park, six blocks to the south, within the next couple of years.

Officials in the city's parks and open space division say the neighborhood is well served by parks and that the city is spending limited money on acquiring new parkland in other areas.

"It's not like this is some pristine oak savanna or woodland," Niedermeyer said. "It's just this old, leftover chunk of semirural farmland. Half of it was completely bulldozed over at some point."

But Eben Fodor, who runs a community planning and consulting firm in Eugene, said Eugene has plenty of other suitable spots for development.

"We have lots of poorly constructed buildings all over town," Fodor said. "This is one that is already open space, and it has an established value within the community. People recognize it's important to them as

open space."

He agrees that there are places where the city's growth policies conflict.

"And we have to reconcile them," Fodor said. "There certainly are tradeoffs, and I don't think this is a tough call to make."

He has come up with an estimate of how much Madison Meadow adds to the value of 60 neighboring homes. Using formulas developed for Portland and Corvallis, Fodor figures the land, as public open space, boosts property values by roughly \$8,100 per lot. That totals \$486,000, or about the cost of the land.

The question remains if that direct impact and the other benefits to the larger neighborhood are enough to loosen residents' pocketbooks. Contributions so far range from \$10 to \$5,000, and total about \$20,000. Organizers have less than six months to raise about \$200,000 more to secure the land. If they bring in \$130,000 more, the rest may come in loans.

The group has approached about 150 residents so far, including some in the high-end College Hill area.

"There's definitely enough money around here where this could be done without a big burden," Haines said. "If 300 people give \$300 each, you're there."

If the drive falls short, the group will return the money, he said.