

NOVATO HISTORY MUSEUM



The Novato Historian

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Preserving Novato's History

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A Mobile Home Park? NIMBY!

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[I am indebted to the Novato Advance edited by George Barnwell as the source of names and facts appearing in this article. Copies of the 1968 issues are on microfilm at the Novato branch library.]

Background: the first six months of 1968

The "Summer of Love" in the Haight-Ashbury district of San Francisco was degenerating into just plain drug abuse. Novato was a city, but did not have the city limits we know at present. The new city was negotiating with the County of Marin for planning influence over zoning and building project approvals in much of the Novato Valley. The city had only been incorporated for six years, and was still being guided by its first city manager, John Julian Baget. (Baget would move on to become head of the Associated Bay Area Governments [ABAG] organization in the near future; but while he was in the city job, he exercised a firm hand on the corporate controls.) The original City Council was beginning to cycle out of office. Wayne Womack, the current mayor, was one of the original incorporators. The other councilmen were Douglas Merrill, Jack Adams, 'Babe' Silva, and Harley McAskill. Clark Palmer was the city attorney.

Politics were hot since this year was an election year for three of the council seats. Womack

and Merrill were standing for reelection, Jack Adams was bowing out. There were nine aspirants for the other three seats. Candidates whose hats were in the ring were: Robert Lagle, the first planning director for the city who resigned in the summer of 1967 to become a consultant to developers; Wilfred Lieb, a lifelong resident of Novato who still today raises chickens across the creek from Rancho school at 1521 Hill Road; Don R. Telford, a certified public accountant who lived in the Domingo Canyon area of Ignacio Valley; Joseph Bonomolo, owner of the B&B Service Station at 906 Diablo and president of the San Marin Homeowners Assn. making his second run at a council seat; Joseph Gargiulo, principal of the Novato Continuation High School; Wayne Hathaway, a banker and Novato's first city treasurer; and Mrs. Pat Beyer, a city planning commissioner. Joe Gargiulo, after he and his dog conducted an extensive campaign by foot throughout Novato, would emerge triumphant. It is reasonable to assume at all times prior to the election that any of these persons would have been happy to express an opinion on any topic currently before the Council.

George Barnwell was the editor of the Novato Advance, the weekly local paper, and a director of the Novato Chamber of Commerce. He published extensive coverage of both sides of

most hot political questions in Novato. He was aided by two conscientious reporters, Ed Dolan and Sue Johnson, both of whom had broad and deep contacts in the Novato community. At the Marin County Board of Supervisors, Novato was represented by William Gness, a long time Novato resident and respected politician.

As in the present, civil government in 1968 was a loquacious democracy. Planning decisions were first vetted by the city's Planning Department, which in January of 1968 was headed by Mark David, the Council's new hire from La Mesa, California. David was hired over the preferred candidate of City Manager Baget, and friction developed between the two men that resulted in Baget's dismissing David within three months of starting employment. The question then arose as to whether Baget exceeded his authority by acting without prior approval of the Council. This question was resolved amicably between Baget and the Council by the Council ceding its power to the office of the City Manager.

The future of Novato was seen in go-go terms in 1968. New housing was springing up like mushrooms in a damp lawn. The city's land use master plan envisioned an eventual population of 200,000 in the valley. The Chamber of Commerce, (staffed by Don Loegering, a recent hire as manager, and Mrs. Billie Garl who was entering the second half of her second year as secretary) although active in both the business and political communities, was experiencing a membership slump. The board of directors consisted of: Cal Maurer, manager of the local Bank of America; George Barnwell, editor of the Advance; Glen Tovani, manager of the local Bank of Marin; Lee Wise, local office manager of PG&E; Wayne Womack, mayor, owner of Womack's Fabrics and of Womack Realty; Otto Haiungs, Novato police officer; Ross Wright, manager of Western California Telephone Co.'s office; Walter DelRose, owner of the Peacock

Restaurant at Seventh and Grant; Roy Fry, accountant and an owner of General Business Services; Col. Charles Praul, Hamilton Air Force base commander; and Roger Hillman, representing the Novato Jaycees club. David Price Jones, Richard Nave, and Avajeon Anderson were key committee chairs. The locus of power in this organization was also under dispute. The Board had recently been enlarged to diversify membership representation, so a three-person screening committee had been created in 1967 to expedite

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selection of a new Chamber manager. President Jack Kinney (Novato Ambulance Service – before the fire district took over), V.P. William Siler, and director Richard Nave (then President of the Marin County Chamber of Commerce) preferred a candidate other than Loegering; but Don was hired by a split vote of the entire board of directors. Within four months Loegering was fired by the Executive committee, headed by Kinney, creating a turmoil within the Chamber which pitted the Executive committee against the Board as a whole.

Ben Ostlind was active through the county Aviation Commission in promoting the civilian use of Hamilton Air Field, and after considerable effort he had convinced the federal government to consider construction of a civilian landing strip parallel to the still active military air strip. By mid March he had sold the County Supervisors on the idea, so both the “Save Gness Field as the civilian air port” and the “No Civilian Aviation at Hamilton” elements were organizing to oppose Mr. Ostlind's idea.

Ed Adams, Novato Park and Recreation Department head, had convinced the City to place a \$2,250,000 park bond proposal on the ballot to finance development of 11 park projects on 76 acres identified in the 1965 long-range P & R Facilities Master Plan. Despite significant effort, this bond would fail at the polls in March. This was also the time Novato's first sign ordinance was being extensively debated, then

enacted, then immediately challenged by a law suit filed by Robert Carrow as plaintiff's attorney, contesting the first variance to the new ordinance granted by the Council for a large free-standing sign at the Denny's restaurant at the corner of DeLong Ave. and Redwood Blvd.

This was also the year the Council created the first Grant Avenue Beautification Committee. With Mrs. George (Ernestine) Barnwell of the Novato Garden Club at its head, and Richard A. Burgi, landscape designer, and Roderick W. Bagnall, manager of the Ignacio Nursery, as its expert members. G. Tom Telfer (architect), William J. Olsen (real estate appraiser), Mrs. Phillip (Peg) Coady, Mrs. Donald (Gail) Wilhelm, Mrs. Jackson Bunker, and Mrs. Leo G. Mindling, were also selected to confer, study and recommend the type and location of the sidewalk trees (that the City removed when it renovated Grant Avenue in the 21st century). The police chief, Robert DiGrazia, filed for divorce after 13 years of marriage, and one of Novato's earliest and most prolific builder/developers, John Novak, filed for bankruptcy. 1968 was off to a tumultuous start!!

It is important to note that the newly-formed city was in the process of establishing its city boundaries, a process that required annexation of lands which were at the time under Marin County administration. Most annexations occurred as a result of negotiations with the landowners who bargained for desired development rights in exchange for incorporation into the city limits. The water district, the sewer district, and the fire district all had their own established district boundaries which exceeded those of the city, so they were of little aid to expansion of city influence. Marin County, through a joint powers agreement, did present development applications within the valley to the city's Planning Department for comment as a matter of courtesy.

Enter the mobile home parks

Into this stew of conflicts and politics came a series of proposals for mobile home parks on unincorporated land adjacent to Novato city boundaries. [Aside: The difference between a

mobile home and a trailer is that the former lacks the wheels and portability of the latter. There is usually a substantial size difference in both length and width as well as a difference in the method of utilization, with mobile homes being the more permanent residences.]

Prior to 1968 two mobile home park proposals had recently received approval by the County. One was a 440 unit proposed development along San Antonio Creek near the Sonoma County line north of Novato. This park would never come to



Location of the Sandbach property just off San Marin Drive, ca. 2008.

fruition, but that fact was unknown in 1968. The second approved application was for 300 mobile homes in the Hamilton Air Force Base area. This park would eventually be built and is now called the Marin Valley Mobile Home Park. In addition there were three small trailer parks then existing: Bobo's Trailer Park on the east side of Redwood Blvd. south of Lamont Street, a small park still tucked in on the east side of the freeway south of Atherton Ave. (which is the only one that accepts transients), and a park that was razed in the 1980s just north of Dairyman's Mill on the east side of Redwood Blvd. Finally there were vague and indefinite rumors of a potential application somewhere on Olive Avenue, but that never materialized.

In January 1968, Mr. and Mrs. Anthony Sandbach, long-time residents of Novato who lived on the top of the ridge at the north end of

Seventh Street, petitioned the County to change the zoning to permit a 66 unit adult mobile home park to be built on 12 acres of the north end of their property. The park was proposed for the valley accessed from the south side of San Marin Drive about 700 feet east of Simmons Lane, an area not yet within Novato's city limits. This is currently known as Somerset Drive. This area was zoned for residential use in the County master plan. After being referred to the City for a courtesy review, the proposal received a negative recommendation from both City planning staff and the City Planning Commission. The County Planning Staff concurred in recommending denial. The Sandbach location required fairly substantial grading which Thomas Cordill, County Zoning Administrator, opined would



Bobo's Trailer Park ca. 2008

“hinder integration into the community.” [Advance, 20-21-68 @ A6] This application, together with the other applications submitted about the same time brought to both the City's and the County's attention the fact that neither entity had any development criteria or real information concerning the impact on the tax base of such development. San Marin residents, through their spokesman, Wayne Sartain, president of the San Marin Improvement Association, predicted diminishment of their property values. Tax conservatives envisioned a drain on city resources since the mobile home units were taxed as motor vehicles, not in the property tax as houses. They

predicted that increases in fire and police protection and with some parks the additional public school attendance would not be paid for by tax revenues available to the local government. Seniors tended to support the proposals citing the potential for housing they could afford and of communities that offered more freedom for trav-

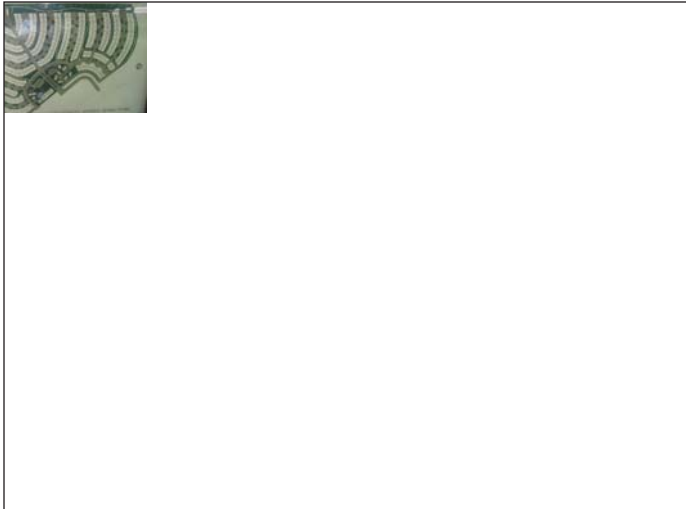


Novato Mobile Home Park, near Atherton Avenue

el and less expensive maintenance than conventional residences. On February 14 more than 30 persons attended a City Council hearing on the Sandbach application, many of whom supported it. The Council voted to delay action for 60 days and direct the planning commission to study the criteria for mobile home parks and guidelines as to the areas in which they might be acceptable. At its mid March meeting, despite what appeared to be a more favorable attitude toward mobile home parks, the County Planning Commission bowed to a storm of political pressure from Novato, and continued the Sandbach application for the 30 days needed to allow Novato to complete its study.

In mid April the Novato City Council addressed the issue of mobile home parks. April 22 was designated for the public hearing on the study report and to consider amendments to the city zoning ordinance. There was some conflict between staff and the politicians, with the former recommending a minimum size of 150 units to assure economic feasibility. On the other hand there was agreement (1) to allow no more than 7

units per acre, (2) to require unity of ownership (as opposed to sale of the lots to individuals), (3) to require a 3600 square foot minimum lot size, (4) to demand that 500 square feet per unit be devoted to central recreational facilities, (5) to mandate concealment of wheel assemblies by skirting, (6) to provide for separate walk ways and road systems within the park, and (7) to grant the Plan Review Committee power to dictate the



Parcel Map of Los Robles Mobile Home Park

screening or fencing to be installed around the park. The Council sincerely hoped the County would adopt these restrictions as a joint standard.

This April 22 meeting was to experience a tragedy. Mrs Sandbach, who was in attendance both for the mobile home item and for a debate on a proposed dog leash law, suffered a heart attack and died. This did not aid her application, however. On May 8 the Council recommended to the County that the Sandbach application be denied (4-1 with Babe Silva in the minority). Excessive grading due to the steepness of the terrain and the visibility impact on San Marin Drive were the factors cited for the negative vote. On May 22 the County Planning Commission, under the watchful eye of Novato City Manager Baget, voted 3 to 3 on the request for rezoning. Since a majority vote was required to rezone property, the tie

denied the application. After all the fuss, it is interesting that the Novato commissioner, Eugene Trombly, voted in favor of the rezoning.

Meanwhile a second proposal was being processed at the same time as the Sandbach application, so it was subject to the same delays relating to the study and lack of predictable policy. This application was for a 201 lot mobile home park on 30 acres owned by the Pimentel estate located between Highway 101 and Hamilton Drive on Bel Marin Keys Drive, another area not yet in the city limits. The zoning on this land was industrial, however, not residential. The Cortez Development Company, a company in which Robert Roberts of Roberts and Aquirre Builders was a principal, proposed to name this park "Los Robles Mobile Home Park." As with the Sandbach application, zoning would become a major issue. As part of the 1800 acres of land zoned for industry in the Novato 1965 master plan, arguments were made that this site was unsuitable for residential use. The proximity of the freeway and the airfield were also cited as negative aspects. San Rafael attorney Albert Bianchi argued that the industrial area was over-large considering the actual rate of industrial development, and that the Novato Planning Commission was guilty of "pure municipal hypocrisy" in voting (2-3) against the proposal on the same night they opposed the Sandbach



Marin Valley Mobile Home Country Club

application in a residential zone. [Advance 2-7-68 @ B8] Loma Verde residents mobilized to oppose the project led by Arnold Baptiste, then President of the Loma Verde Property Owner's

Association, who spoke against the “erosion of prime industrial land.” Again the impact on other residential values was an underlying issue; however, no objections to this site were received from residents of Bel Marin Keys as of the time the County Commission approved the zoning change on March 6. On April 14, at a joint meeting, the Novato City Council and its Planning Commission reversed their previous positions and approved the project. On April 17 the Board of Supervisors gave final approval, and this park was subsequently constructed.

One might think that approval of Los Robles M.H.P. left Sandbach as the only pending application. Not so. At the January 30 City Council meeting where the Council first expressed its general opposition to the two pending applications, City Planner Mark David announced that a 1,800 unit park was being considered on 275 acres of the 710 acre old Sartori farm south of Highway 37 near Black Point. (Where the present



Los Robles Mobile Home Park has matured nicely.

Stone Ridge development is located.) Jack Kenny, an official of Kenny Homes which had built 1200 homes in Marin, proposed to construct 200 homes on the hilly part, and 1800 units of mobile housing on the low lying area, which he would fill in part. The mobile home park would be developed 200 units at a time, he told the Black Point Club in mid February, with development to stop if the demand for mobile homes abated. Twenty-five per cent would be trailers, and the rest would be mobile homes; part of the park would be adults only, although standards for the whole area were projected to exceed five-star rating. Kenny envisioned constructing 2 large publicly accessible lakes and probably 5 to 8 miles of riding trails. Each pod of 400 units would have its own swimming pool. The plans

envisioned a shopping center, professional center golf course, marina and 110 acres of open space. The entire project would be surrounded by a levee. Build-out was projected over 10 years generating a population of between 3,600 and 6,000 new residents.

While the official submission of this project didn't occur until mid March, the shadow of this project hung over the deliberations on the other sites. The Black Point Club came out in opposition on March 13, raising the taxation and school expense issues. The reservation of two school sites underlined these concerns. In addition,

Henry Taggart and Al Oliver raised the issue that mobile homes are manufactured off-site, thereby not generating any new work for local (union) construction workers. The Novato Planning Commission registered a negative advisory vote against the proposal on April 9. On May 20 the County Planning Commission approved the 1800 unit park by a 6 to 2 vote, and even the two dissenters were

basically in favor of the project. Prior to definitive action by the County, more contradictory information was developed about the cost of mobile home developments to the host community. Finally on June 14 Bill Gness, joined by Peter Behr and Tom Storer, out voted Ernest Kettenhofen and John McInnis to defeat the application at the Board of Supervisors to the relief of the Black Point Club members.

The Bible says all things have their season, and early 1968 was the season for mobile home parks proposals. Of the 2,807 units proposed, only 501 were ever built, and that was the last year any mobile home project was approved in the Novato valley.