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Welcome to Sunol

It's a small community wanting to keep things the same

by Teresa Brown

Sunol is a small town with a quiet charm reminiscent of bygone days. The slow-paced settlement seems paradoxical in comparison to the fast life existing minutes away off I-680. Through the years, it has resisted urban development, preferring instead the small town feel.

But the community faces an unknown future against encroaching growth, a diminishing student population, and, most of all, a quarry development next door.

Located three miles south of Pleasanton, Sunol's rural setting is home to about 1,000 people. "Sunol is an oasis in the midst of madness," said Patricia Stillman, a 32-year resident and president of Save Our Sunol (SOS), a nonprofit organization dedicated to preserving the town.

"It's like going back in time in a community where everyone knows one another," she said. That's not a surprise with lifelong residents like Jim O'Laughlin, president of the Sunol Business Guild. He lives only a half block from his boyhood home, where his aunt now lives.

The unincorporated town has a spirit of its own, manifesting itself through SOS.

"Everyone has their eye on Sunol," said Stillman, who is protective of its rural charm.

"You want to keep it that way. It wouldn't be the way it is if we didn't muster the troops and fight for it."

Stillman is a woman dedicated to preserving Sunol and its surrounding countryside. "It's been a mission with me."

SOS, an 80-member-strong organization, was created by residents who wanted to protect their way of life from urban influences. "I've spent all my life in Sunol fighting off development," said the gray-haired mother who founded SOS in 1991.

Hearing about a development project on Pleasanton Ridge, she responded. "My husband made me a flier and we walked door to door on Kilkare Road and had a meeting that night," she recalled. "And SOS was founded."

Stillman explained that the proposed development included 2,630 homes as well as an experimental sewage treatment plant. The Alameda County Board of Supervisors already had approved the project, and the townspeople had 30 days to contest it by obtaining 36,000 signatures in opposition, Stillman said.

SOS gathered 56,000 signatures and the board rescinded its approval. "Now that area is Pleasanton Ridge Park," she said.

But the rebuffed development projects come at a price. Without development, the town does not have the tax base to support incorporation, Stillman explained. Incorporation

means autonomy; without it, the town's welfare sits in the hands of the county Board of Supervisors in Oakland.

The supervisors try to work with Sunol, said Stillman. "We're delighted with Gail Steele (Sunol is her district). She has always been supportive of Sunol's rural identity."

The community also has its own school district, although Sunol Unified School District, formed in 1971, has only one school, Sunol Glen Elementary.

Established in 1925, the school teaches kindergarten through eighth grade under the guidance of Diane Everett, superintendent of the district. Everett oversees the school as well as the Bay Area School for Independent Study, a charter school for home-schooled students, none of them currently Sunol residents.

The single-school district was formed by choice. When Pleasanton and Dublin were unifying schools, they were going to include Sunol, Everett said. "People here fought furiously to keep this a one-school school district."

A petition was taken to then-Sen. Bill Lockyer, who introduced legislation allowing Sunol to keep its unified district, she said.

With 182 students, the school has small classes, averaging 18 students. This year, however, it is burgeoning with 30 seventh-graders.

The school also provides individual attention. For example, staff members unofficially adopt students who have been identified as at risk, giving them special attention. "They try to give the child an adult to connect with at school," Everett said.

Of the total enrollment, 46 percent are students from other districts, including Pleasanton, Livermore, Castro Valley, Fremont, San Leandro and Antioch, Everett said. The school's curriculum is closely patterned after Pleasanton's because Sunol students move on to Foothill High School.

An enrollment decline in the last two years prompted the district to take a proactive stance last year, marketing the school to entice inter-district transfer students. "I'm sure the school would shut down if we had only Sunol kids," Everett said.

The school has always had its share of transfer students, but now the community population is aging, she added. Like other public schools, the state provides primary funding based on Average Daily Attendance.

The community and parents also subsidize the school. "We are so fortunate the Sunolians really love this school," said Everett. "They passed a \$2.1 million bond about three years ago for us."

Private benefactors also have made substantial donations. Several individuals donated \$25,000 each to renovate the playgrounds, Everett said. In the past, it was not uncommon for parents to come to the school and write out \$1,000 checks.

Sunol Glen's future is not secure. The state master plan for education includes incorporating small school districts, like Sunol, into larger ones, Everett said. "That could happen here. A larger unified school district could take us over."

Unlike the school, other public services come from outside sources. Police protection comes from the Sheriff's Department and fire from the California Department of Forestry. Pleasanton supplies water for part of the town, while another section gets water from San Francisco, a longtime neighboring landowner, which recently became tied up in litigation with SOS.

A 40-year lease that San Francisco is locked into with gravel company Mission Valley Rock has Sunol up in arms. The lease approves the company's development of a 200-acre quarry site on farmland between I-680 and Sunol.

SOS, in coordination with the Preserve Area Ridglands Committee and the Alameda Creek Alliance, filed a lawsuit requesting the quarry proposal be put to the voters. The point of contention, Stillman said, is whether or not the proposed quarry is an extension or a new development. SOS contends the site is new and must be voted on, in accordance with Measure D passed in 2000, which requires countywide voter approval of development beyond an urban growth boundary.

Mission Valley insists it is an expansion of an existing quarry - that the proposed quarry was given a permit in 1994 and overlaps with another site that was permitted in 1992. The issue stems from San Francisco's ownership of land bordering Sunol, which dates back more than 70 years. But changes in land ownership around Sunol began much earlier.

"A Place Called Sunol," a book by Connie DeGrange and Allen DeGrange, outlines Sunol's history.

For more than 5,000 years, the Ohlone Indians lived in the valley. It was also home to an abundance of wildlife, including elk, antelope, bear, mountain lion and salmon. During the 1700s, Spanish explorers settled in the area, adversely affecting the indigenous people. Between 1770 and 1835, the Ohlone population plummeted from 10,000 to less than 2,000.

By the mid-1800s, land in the Tri-Valley area was parceled out into ranchos, including a 64,000-acre land grant to the Bernal siblings. Rancho del Valle de San Jose was the 14,000-acre rancho of Antonio Maria Sunol (Maria Dolores Bernal's husband).

Although Sunol lived in San Jose, his son, also of the same name, moved to the rancho in the 1840s. There he centralized ranching operations, building an adobe just west of the present water temple. Sunol lived there until his death at the hands of a squatter in 1855. With the squatters came sheep, which competed with the cattle for grazing land. When a drought hit in 1864, compounding their problems, many landowners were unable to pay their taxes. By 1870, the once vast Rancho del Valle de San Jose was reduced to one-third its original size.

Within four years, the Spring Valley Water Co. had bought most of the land and water rights. The company supplied water to Oakland and San Francisco from the Alameda and Calaveras creeks.

In 1930, San Francisco, securing water resources, bought the water company and its holdings, which included most of Sunol Valley. Included on the land was the water temple, an ornate structure commissioned specially for its location.

In the 1990s, SOS successfully took on San Francisco, persuading the city to restore the deteriorating temple. Today the temple remains a majestic monument to another time, much like Sunol.

In spite of a rapid, high-speed world jostling to absorb the small community, Sunol has successfully maintained its atmosphere. As it faces an uncertain future preserving its identity, the community continues to revel in its lack of traffic signals, cookie-cutter homes, shopping developments and fast-food spots.

As resident Lina Owlsey said: It's just a small community wanting to keep things the same.

Sunol Water Temple

Sitting back at the end of a drive bordered by farmland is the water temple. Built in 1910, a Spring Valley Water Co. stockholder commissioned San Francisco architect Willis Polk to design the rotund neoclassical. With 24 columns rising from the perimeter of a 45-foot concrete base, at one time the structure acted as a glorious junction for company's Alameda-source water and about 6 million gallons of water surged under the temple daily.

Elliston Vineyards

In 1885 Henry Ellis, a wealthy San Francisco gold miner, businessman and retired chief of police, began construction on a Victorian home on Kilkare Road. It took five years to complete the impressive 17-room, three-story home with stone arches and 32-inch thick blue sandstone walls, quarried from Niles Canyon. Ellis raised his family there. Since 1992, owners Keith and Donna Flavetta have operated Elliston Vineyards from its halls. The building is on the National Register of Historic Places.

Sunol Glen School

Sunol Glen Elementary School has been educating children since 1925 and was unified as a school district in 1971, becoming a single-school district. About 182 students attend the kindergarten-eighth grade school and about 46 percent of those are inter-district transfers. The appeal is a small class size, about 18 students per class, and only one class per grade level.

Mayor Bosco and Main Street

The historical little town's Main Street boasts the Niles Canyon Railway, offering scenic rides through the canyon; an antique shop in an 1888 general store that burned in 1916 and was rebuilt; and a steak house and saloon thriving in a replica of an original 1862 Sunol building. But one of its more delightful "tails" is Mayor Bosco. In 1981, Sunol's howling good figurehead was a local canine named Bosco, who was unofficially elected mayor. Locals cheerfully accepted the good-natured ambassador, who, wearing a specially made vest and badge, led all the marches and parades downtown. Bosco died in 1994 at about 13 years of age. Bosco's Bones and Brew Steakhouse and Saloon was named in his honor.

Little Brown Church

For 117 years, the Little Brown Church has stood quietly in Sunol, weathering good and bad times. Built in 1885, it was originally called the Congregational Church of Sunol and was painted white. The early 1900s was a bleak time for the church with membership falling to four. To generate renewed interest, in 1954, members painted the church brown and renamed it the Little Brown Church. Today it's a functioning church, with 60 to 100 weddings held annually. In 1998, the church officially began to welcome gay members, and it is affiliated with the United Church of Christ.