

What Makes Saratoga, Saratoga?

Jeffrey A. Schwartz

A week ago, a visiting San Francisco Police Captain told our Mayor, Jill Hunter, that he had never before visited Saratoga and was struck by how beautiful and bucolic it is.

Saratogans frequently talk about our city's natural beauty, the views of our almost pristine hills, a tree canopy unmatched in the Bay Area, our quiet, semi rural atmosphere, our extraordinarily low crime rate and extraordinarily high property values, our schools and more. Even our problems may be strengths. Traffic is ugly in some areas but it is far better than surrounding communities. Saratoga does not offer the range of services of a Palo Alto or a Sunnyvale, but we have remained true to the vision of our founders as a low service city with a small, efficient and resident-oriented staff.

The question that is seldom considered is "Why is Saratoga the way it is?" The answer is surprising and much different from the situation in other Bay Area communities. In short, Saratoga today is a result of prior direct actions by its residents, not primarily by its past City Councils and Planning Commissions. In the mid 1970's, it was a foregone conclusion that West Valley College would succeed in building a 20,000 to 30,000 seat sports stadium, high mast lighting and huge outdoor sound systems. A group of residents opposed the stadium. They grew quickly in numbers and political sophistication. (Thirty years later, after the longest running political battle in South Bay history, a successful citizen initiative and two cases reaching the California Supreme Court, the issue was resolved in favor of the resident group, by then joined by the City). No major sports stadium. In 1979, that same group of environmentally oriented residents developed an initiative, Measure A, to stop the runaway development beginning in Saratoga's hillsides. After a brutal political battle, Measure A won handily and was something of a watershed in Saratoga history. In a related move, Saratoga adopted slope-density formulae that effectively limited the largest new homes to six to seven thousand square feet. Surrounding communities continue to this day to build monster homes in the fifteen thousand square foot range. Saratoga's early tree ordinance, initially supported by the same resident group, provided far more protection for our canopy and heritage trees than was present in other Bay Area cities. A little known facet of Measure A was that the city agreed not to site homes on major or minor ridgelines. Those, by the way, are the primary reasons our hillsides look different than the Los Gatos hillsides.

In 1996, Saratoga was facing increasing pressure for cluster homes, planned unit developments and other kinds of high-density infill. The same group of residents who had developed Measure A and fought the West Valley Football Stadium to a standstill, were joined by some remarkable newcomers. They gathered signatures and placed Measure G on the ballot. Like Measure A, it was opposed by the City Council unanimously, the local newspapers, the Chamber of Commerce, and everyone short of the United Nations. It was predicted to be the end of Western Civilization as we know it and its opponents out-spent its proponents by more than five to one, like Measure A and Measure Q. Also like those initiatives, measure G faced a bitter, personal and divisive political campaign. It was supported only by residents and homeowner associations. It won in a landslide. It was and is the strongest controlled growth ordinance in the State of California and it has succeeded beyond even its proponent's highest expectations.

Several years later, a church sold excess church land on Prospect to the City at more than a million dollars below market value, with the proviso that it be used it for civic purposes. A majority of the City Council said the requirement to use the land for civic purposes was not legally binding and voted to sell the land to a developer so the City could pocket the profits. Many of the same residents came together to spearhead a referendum that was, once again, hugely successful. The result? The City's North Campus is now an integral part of our community.

Thus, the answer to the initial question of “Why is Saratoga so beautiful, quiet, safe and different?” is because of direct action by our residents, placing homeowner and neighborhood needs above those of development interests (which had too often become the interests of our elected and appointed officials). The West Valley Stadium fight, Measure A, our slope-density formulas, our major and minor ridgeline prohibitions, our tree ordinance, Measure G, the North Campus: those are primary reasons Saratoga is not Cupertino or Campbell. However, it is difficult to describe the commitment, the tens of thousands of hours of work, the amount of money that had to be raised and the emotional toll of all of those battles. Who is responsible for those things? Unfortunately, some of the key people have passed away (Dora Grens, Vic Monia, Russ Crowther, Miles Rankin, Willys Peck, Jim Shaw) and others have moved away or moved on (Jim Stuart, Meg Caldwell, Willem Kohler). Still others remain engaged in the same effort to preserve the essential character of our City (Stan Bogosian, Cheriell Jensen, Jack Mallory, Marcia Fariss, Betty Peck, Ann Waltonsmith, “Stutz” Stutzman), and too many others to name. The difference between Saratoga and our surrounding communities is the difference these folks have made.

It appears the current Council majority and Planning Commission are unaware of this history or do not respect it. Increasing commercial height limits, story limits, granting of unnecessary variances and increases in density and intensity of use suggest it may again be time for residents to act to preserve what is Saratoga.