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Spreckels, California and Responsible Land Use

By Julia Elena Brown

Spreckels, an historic town in the Salinas Valley, has found itself in the middle of a struggle to save its identity from corporate farmers who want to build a subdivision on surrounding farmland and increase the town's size by 40%. Spreckels' situation is far from unique. The demand for new homes throughout California is forcing farmland to give way to urban sprawl. Allowing this trend to continue can and will lead to a variety of economic and environmental damage from which our state might never recover.

Introduction

I keep an AAA map of Salinas in my glove compartment because I have a habit of getting lost. My map is well worn and very much appreciated. It tells me that Salinas is a densely populated island, surrounded by what the map shows as blank space. But what's that little grouping of streets to the south? That's Spreckels; you don't need your map there. It's only twelve square blocks, and no one thinks of it except to say, "Isn't that sugar or something?"

Well, yes, it is, but it's more than that too. Spreckels is a century-old town, built for sugar refinery workers, populated by the people who grow your food, surrounded by some of the richest soil in the world, classified as a historic district (Mathews), and at risk of becoming just another bedroom community for Silicon Valley commuters.

But like I said, Spreckels is only twelve square blocks, who cares? Well, the town residents care. The majority of them don't want to see their quaint town become another San Jose suburb (Parsons). And you should care, too. The land that might be turned into subdivisions is used for crops now. That lettuce in your chicken Caesar, where do you think it came from? "But there's

plenty more land to grow lettuce on," you say. It's true, there is, but what happens when all that land is gone? What happens when this rich valley floor is carpeted in subdivisions? I'll tell you: Congested highways will become even more crowded, air pollution will flourish, and all those people who work the land now will be forced out. Sorry, son, you're not allowed in our valley unless you make six figures (Bardacke).

Will all of this happen because the Tanimura family builds seventy-two more houses? No, not immediately. This is an issue that has been building for years. I see these subdivisions all up and down highway 101 everywhere from Salinas all the way up past San Francisco. This sort of urban sprawl hurts everyone involved. When big-city commuters move into a town like Spreckels, they force out the working people: the firefighters, the teachers, the garbage collectors. Now if you want to work in the town you have to commute in. This situation is happening all over our state and the best way to slow its spread is to stop it in our own back yard. (Bardacke)

Why do I care? Because in five years I might just be one of those teachers who works in a town where she cannot afford to live. It probably won't be Spreckels. It might be any town

throughout this state. Urban sprawl is happening everywhere.

Now I don't lie to myself; I know this paper isn't going to save Spreckels. I know that it won't stop urban sprawl. But there are organizations that work to promote responsible land use and to prevent a future that would make Monterey County look like L.A. One of these is LandWatch, where I have been volunteering. At LandWatch, I help fold letters, stuff envelopes, and get the word out that we can change the future if we don't like where it's headed. I work for this organization because it works working class families, including the ones who live in Spreckels.

My politics and my project

My definition of "politics" is any action that affects society. Too often we think of politics as that nasty stuff that politicians do when they want to further their own careers, but the message I have taken from my Social and Environmental History of California class is that any of us can be political; each of us can and should work to support the causes that we believe in.

I don't believe it's necessary to become involved in every cause, but I do believe that we all have an obligation to take an active role in shaping society. From simply voting or signing a petition to donating money or time to a local grassroots organization like LandWatch, even the smallest contribution is political.

There are, of course, those individuals who dedicate their lives to political action. Individuals like Lupe Garcia (a speaker Lupe Garcia gave a presentation about political participation in Brown's Social and Environmental History of California class) who has

worked to improve the schools of East Salinas and has fought local governments to guarantee affordable housing for all members of the community; individuals like Elizabeth Panetta who is a resident of Spreckels and goes to work every day to make sure that land development in Monterey County is fair and responsible. I have worked with both of these women at LandWatch and they have taught just how much a group of concerned, dedicated citizens can accomplish.

My time at LandWatch gave me the inspiration I needed to change my research project from one concerning affirmative action to one about land development. I was at the office one day, working with Elizabeth when she explained that corporate farmers in her town had plans to develop farmland that would increase the town's size by almost half. After giving me a few more details about the town and the controversy, which I will tell you all more about in the next section, she send me off to the Monterey County Office of Planning and Development to get a few documents regarding this bit of land.

As I learned more about Spreckels I started to think that it was a topic I wanted to look into further. To me, this town represents all the little towns around the state, especially those within one hundred miles of San Jose, that are changing from agricultural-based communities to bedroom communities built out of subdivisions. There are plenty of arguments to be made against the creation of subdivisions: increased congestion on roads and highways, greater demand on available water supplies, but, to me, the loss of town character, especially in a historic district like Spreckels is the most concerning.

A brief history of Spreckels

My first step in researching the town of Spreckels was to sit down at my trusty computer and do a Google search of "Spreckels." As a result, I learned a lot about Claus Spreckels and his exciting life as a German-born, globe trotting sugar pioneer, and not too much about the actual town. I won't waste my paper or your time with the details of his life, but will, instead, jump right into Spreckels' beginnings as a company town and a sugar beet Mecca.

Although the story begins much earlier, we will start in 1895 when Claus Spreckels began buying land in the Salinas Valley to use for sugar beet crops, a sugar refinery and, of course, a small company town to house his workers and to ensure that there would always be employees enough to keep his factory in business. Spreckels already owned crops and a refinery in the Pajaro Valley, near Watsonville, but he did not have enough farmland or a large enough refinery to keep up with the demand for sugar (Anderson).

In 1897, Mr. Spreckels hired Charles Pioda to survey the land for the future company town. "The town was planned on a grid system that included three rows of five rectangular blocks, each block divided into 20 lots." Spreckels then hired prominent Watsonville-based architect, William H. Weeks to design the workers' homes'. Construction continued from 1898 to 1901; when the town was completed, it included only twelve of the fifteen planned blocks. Although very small, the town had a post office, a hotel which housed visitors and single workers, a brick emporium, general store, bank,

school house, and, of course, a bar. (Mathews)

In 1907, Clause Spreckels submitted a map to Monterey County. This map shows (which, in my final copy I will include a picture of) all fifteen of the planned blocks. The county accepted this map and it was virtually forgotten until the 1980s. The three blocks that were never built are now fertile, productive farmland, and the town remains as its original size of twelve blocks that have seen many changes in the past hundred years.

Spreckels flourished until the mid 1920's. The Twenties brought the "beet blight," a disease spread by grasshoppers from Idaho across the American West. Crops were destroyed and farmers could no longer make a living on the land, nor could they support the small businesses that made Spreckels such a social town. In 1925, every business in town except the Emporium closed its doors as a result of the blight and economic depression. This town slump continued for a decade until the refining resumed with disease-resistant beets. (Mathews)

For much of its life, the Spreckels Sugar factory was the largest sugar beet refinery in the world. Although refining ceased in 1982, the factory continued as the packaging center for all Spreckels factories until 1994. (Anderson)

The current dilemma

I alluded to the current debate in my introduction, but let me now give you a slightly more in-depth view of what's going on and the arguments that are being made on both sides.

Tanimura family, who now owns the land that Claus Spreckels once

planned to use as part of his town, wants to build the houses and infrastructure that was planned in 1907. The proposed development includes 72 new homes and would increase the town's size by 40%. (Livernois)

Many of the town's residents do not want to see this happen. They argue that a new development would destroy the town's character and add to congestion and crowding in this small, close-knit community.

On September 25, 2003, the *Monterey Herald* reported that a group of Spreckels residents

...have challenged the age-old assumption among land-use experts that property owners have a right to build on their own property as long as the property was legally subdivided, even if the subdivision was created almost a century ago. (Livernois)

This "age-old assumption" is a key part of the Fifth Amendment called the "takings clause", which states, "...nor shall private property be taken for public use, without just compensation." (Findlaw.com). Landowners often use the takings clause to argue that they have the right to develop their property as they see fit and any government regulation constitutes a taking.

To demonstrate this let's leave California for a bit and travel to one of those tiny East Coast states and look at the case of *Palazzolo v. Rhode Island* (2001). According to the Center for Individual Freedoms, Mr. Palazzolo owned 18 acres of undeveloped wetlands that are protected by environmental law. The environmental regulations prevented the petitioner from building on his property. Palazzolo argued that these government regulations constituted a

"regulatory takings for which he should be compensated under the Fifth Amendment." (cfif.org) The courts decided that Palazzolo was not entitled to any government compensation "because he was not deprived of all beneficial use of property." (cfif.org)

What's all this got to do with Spreckels? The case of *Palazzolo v. Rhode Island* shows us that the Tanimura family has no Constitutional right to develop the land. But what about that map that our old buddy Clause made? Doesn't that mean that the land was meant to be developed?

To answer this question, we have to look at a little piece of contested land outside of Sebastopol and the case of *Jack A. Gardner et al. v. County of Sonoma*. In this case, a family owned a large piece of undeveloped land that they wanted to sell off as subdivisions based on a map drawn in 1865. There was, however, strong opposition from the neighbors and the county, and the Gardners were not allowed to build. Finally, after a series of appeals over a five-year period, the State Supreme Court ruled that, "early subdivision maps ...do not create legal parcels within the meaning of California's Subdivision Map Act." (*Gardner v. Sonoma*) This means, of course, that an antiquated map like the one that Clause Spreckels drew does not qualify as a legal document which guarantees the right of the landowner to develop. The situation and arguments presented in *Gardner v. Sonoma* are nearly identical to those in *Spreckels*.

Even though both Federal and State courts have ruled against property owners in cases like the one we see in *Spreckels*, there is still no law or legal precedent to prohibit the development of the land if the County finds that this

would be a legal subdivision. As a result, the Association of Spreckels Residents that opposes the development has requested, as an interested party, a Parcel Legality Status Determination. (M. C. Planning Commission) This status determination would force the county to decide on whether or not this would be a legal subdivision. The thing is, only an “interested person” can apply for a Parcel Legality Status Determination and the State has always defined an “interested person” as “any person that owns property or is buying property under a contract of sale.” The Association does not meet the definition of an “interested person” because they are neither buying nor selling the property in question. Despite this setback, the citizens did gain a small victory within the Monterey County Planning Commission. Although the commission decided against determining the parcel legality status, the members ruled that a Certificate of Compliance would have to be completed before any building could begin on the land. With this decision, the Tanimura family will have to prove that their plans are legal before they proceed. (M. C. Planning Commission)

Historical trends that Spreckels exemplifies

The Spreckels Sugar was not the first company to build a town for its workers. “Company towns were created in the United States in the late eighteenth century in response to the industrial revolution” (Mathews, 13) Companies continued to build towns to ensure a steady workforce throughout the nineteenth century. These towns included: Patterson, New Jersey (1791), Lowell, Massachusetts (1821) and

Pullman, Illinois (1879). The first company towns provided row houses or tenements for their workers. Newer company towns, like Spreckels, included schools, parks, libraries and commercial areas. (Mathews, 14)

Even before the area that is today Spreckels was a town, this little piece of land has been a part of the changes that have affected the Salinas Valley, and the entire state. Much of the California landscape has gone through a transformation in the past two centuries: open space to grazing lands to rows of crops to half million-dollar commuter homes: We see this pattern again and again. This is not just a trend that has affected the Salinas Valley. Not far off in Watsonville, Frank Bardacke poignantly illustrates this familiar situation. In his article, “The Franich Annexation,” Bardacke tells us of a farmer who wants to sell his apple orchard to housing developers. The orchard provides jobs and brings in continued revenue. The houses, on the other hand, would give a one-time boost to the economy; after the initial sale, they would do nothing but add to the congestion of northbound freeways. Bardacke goes on to explain how much of Santa Cruz County has become bedroom communities for San Jose. It is not much of a stretch to relate this to the current situation in Spreckels: a small, working class community whose neighbors are one by one becoming bedroom communities for the Silicon Valley.

To understand this current trend, we must look further into the past, at the roots of California urbanization. This increased population concentration has happened throughout the state at various

times, but its roots are firmly established in the Gold Rush. In her essay, "Gold Rush and the Shaping of the American West," Patricia Nelson Limerick states that,

...Mining, throughout the West, meant a rapidly urbanized kind of settlement, with concentrated populations, in quite a contrast to the more-dispersed, rural pattern of settlement in farming and ranching. Given the fact that the West has turned out to be the most urbanized region, the mining pattern of settlement turned out to be the shaping pattern for the regional future (216)

The same sort of gold rush mentality that occurred in the mid-nineteenth century is happening today around the Silicon Valley and throughout the state. People are flooding into this area, searching for wealth and needing a place to stay. Santa Clara County can only support so many and has already yielded most of its agricultural land to homes, there's just no more space. All of these modern-day miners need someplace to live, they spill into towns like Watsonville, or Salinas, or Spreckels, and all of these little towns are forced to expand and become suburbs.

Reflections on my political project

When I began working with LandWatch a couple months ago, I had no specific goals, but I felt open to whatever might come my way. Lupe Garcia, a LandWatch staffer, had come to talk to the class and told us that LandWatch fought for quality affordable housing and the preservation of open space. 'I like open space', I thought to myself, 'I think every family deserves the opportunity to buy their own house, I'd like to give my time to this

organization'. And I did. My personal goals were to learn more about the land use issues facing the Central Coast and help, in my small way, to advocate responsible land use. These smaller goals, I hoped would help LandWatch's greater political goals of gaining affordable housing, preserving agricultural land, stopping urban sprawl, and protecting natural resources (LandWatch, 7)

My strength training teacher tells us that we need to set challenging yet achievable goals. Although, admittedly, my personal goals could have been more challenging, I believe that they were attainable and I reached them.

Personal Goal #1: Learning: From the moment I stepped in the LandWatch office in Salinas, I began to understand how public policy affects land use. While I filed (more about this in "goal #2"), Elizabeth Panetta gave me the run-down on just some of the development issues here in Monterey County. This included 380-home Seaside Highlands Development off Highway 1, just north of Sand City. The Highlands project, by the way, includes no affordable housing, but that's a whole other HIPP. She also gave me a brief overview of planned developments for the rest of Fort Ord, including Marina Heights and University Village. What she told me was unbelievable: Developers like Kaufman and Broad who want to sell homes at premium prices is no surprise; what shocked me is that the Fort Ord Reuse Authority (FORA) board that decides how much affordable housing must be built was set against building houses for poor and working class families. All this hit close to home, especially because I live two miles for the planned developments.

Then she came to the topic of Spreckels, that little town I had never thought much about. Elizabeth showed me the map and told me, briefly, what I have told you then send me off to the Monterey County Planning and Development Office (MCPDO) to get a copy of a certificate of compliance, which brings me to ...

Personal Goal #2: Doing: I have visited the MCPDO for LandWatch to pick up documents; I have stuffed envelopes (lots of envelopes), and done my share of filing. Although stuffing envelopes is rarely considered a political act, I like to think that it is my way of supporting an organization that I believe in that works to protect the future of Monterey County. Just because my volunteer work was political, doesn't mean it was exciting. The time was, however, enjoyable because I spent it talking to the LandWatch staffers who gave me an insight into the development of our county.

Administrative work aside, I have attended FORA board meetings where I learned about the process of determining where new housing will be built, who will build it, and how much a new homeowner will have to pay.

I don't know what kind of an impact I've had. I am only beginning to feel like I know enough to do something that will make a real impact, like speaking at a FORA board meeting. This is only the beginning. I will continue to work with LandWatch and attend FORA meetings. I will do these things because, as I mentioned in my introduction, LandWatch works for people like me who will never be able to buy a \$600,000 home in Seaside Highlands. More than that, though, I enjoy it.

I have discovered that I like giving my time to causes I believe in. I like being political. My perception of "politics" has not changed over the course of the semester, but my perception of myself has. I don't see myself as someone who will wait for a decision to be made for me. I know now that I have a right to give my input to any issue. If I can speak at a FORA meeting, I can speak at a city council meeting, too. And if I can volunteer at LandWatch, then I can volunteer on the campaign of any candidate that I believe in. These are just simple things that I can do, but I had never even considered them before.

LandWatch's Goals: The goals that I mentioned earlier are all part of the greater goal of making Monterey County a place where we want to live in twenty or thirty years. LandWatch not only works to stop the urban sprawl that threatens Spreckels and protect the farmland that is so often paved over when demand for housing is high. It tries to ensure that communities have decent, affordable housing so that working class families can afford to live where they work. (LandWatch) Clearly, this work is ongoing and there will never be a time when LandWatch's work will be done.

As I write this, I keep thinking of Robert Gottlieb's essay on "Grassroots Environmentalism" that appears in *Green Versus Gold*. Gottlieb explains how one woman, Peggy Newman, organized and fought against toxic dumping near her Southern California home. This story reminds me that I don't need to be rich or well known to have an impact. Gottlieb quotes Newman, "...we are the power."

As uplifting as this thought is, I also remember David Jacks, the man

who ruled Monterey. In *Storied Land*, John Walton discusses the way David Jacks took advantage of the Residents of Monterey County. He conquered the Town of Monterey and the Salinas Valley using political maneuvering and intimidation. He took advantage of his tenants and neighbors and he would have fit in pretty well today. The David Jacks of the Nineteenth Century have become, in my mind, the developers of today. The Tanimuras who want to expand Spreckels and the Kaufman and Broads who build half million-dollar homes that most local residents cannot afford.

What all this comes down to is that we, in Monterey County, can choose the future that we want. We can let modern-day David Jacks rule our housing market at the expense of farmland and the working class, or we can follow Peggy Newman's example by organizing and letting those who we put into power know that we have a right to be heard and we cannot be ignored.

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