

## Santa Clara County fairgrounds plans back to the drawing board

By Karen de Sá  
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It's back to ground zero for the Santa Clara County fairgrounds.

Development of the cash-starved county's last large developable piece of property will reboot yet again, following the abrupt departure of a major developer.

"I'm feeling a little déjà vu-y," said Liz Kniss, president of the county Board of Supervisors, after the board's five members voted unanimously Tuesday to begin the process all over.

The board Tuesday declared the county unwilling to sell the 150-acre property along Tully Road "given the largest drop in land values we have seen in the last two generations," in the words of a memo from newly elected Supervisor George Shirakawa.

Supervisors also voted to interrupt an intensive and ongoing community outreach campaign to begin a new one. Shirakawa — who lives just a mile from the site and remembers being led around the county fair as a toddler — will anchor the new "ad hoc

stakeholders committee." He will begin soon by meeting with square-dancers who, along with 4H Club members and an assortment of other residents, had implored the county to preserve at least a portion of the site for its traditional uses.

Shirakawa thanked county officials who have spent a dozen years preparing to develop the site, but added: "The world has changed."

Since the early 1990s, the fairgrounds site has elicited bitter community battles, a lawsuit and a host of scrapped plans. A concert hall proposal embroiled the county in years of litigation with San Jose. Among other ideas were a NASCAR track, a health center hub and a neighborhood of homes and shops.

Now, after a nearly two-year pursuit of a major developer, that last concept is out the window too, yet another victim of the woeful economy. A curt but pleasant April note from the Catellus Development Group ended a contractual relationship with the county begun just six months earlier.

In its decision to withdraw, the flailing company noted the "uncertain nature of the national and local economic recovery, combined with the uncertainty as to the county's objectives." Catellus Vice President Dan Cohen stated that those factors "precluded us from devoting more of the company's time and financial resources."

Santa Clara County had been counting on the company to bankroll the massive development project, estimated to exceed \$1 billion in costs. But Catellus' parent company, Denver-based ProLogis, has suffered sweeping cuts to its global workforce and spending.

Shirakawa views the loss of Catellus as a window to barrel through. But an already long list of ideas and

opinions about the fairgrounds site is about to get longer.

On Tuesday, supervisors



heard a report from Larry Klamecki, a manager from the county executive's office who has spent almost eight months leading the fairgrounds outreach project to gather community input. To date, Klamecki's team has held 72 meetings with individuals and groups, along with public forums and community speak-outs.

Detailed notes have been kept of ideas and concerns from an array of fairgrounds-lovers, including dog trainers, gun sellers, comic collectors, paint-ballers and antiques collectors. Cultural, religious and ethnic groups who hold everything from Tet festivals to quinceañeras to Islamic services at the site have also weighed in.

Surprisingly, not a single fairgrounds-lover spoke out Tuesday, although for years, dozens have swamped every supervisors' meeting even remotely touching on the subject. Many have urged the supervisors to slow down the process, and they viewed the Catellus developers as barons making off with prized public lands. The contract with the company included an option for the county to sell the property.

Kniss closed the discussion by warning Shirakawa about duplicating recent efforts and asking for regular updates so he doesn't act like "a lone ranger." Shirakawa promised to "take into consideration the work that's already been done."

And Kniss offered this final, tongue-in-cheek advice: "George, you might consider a concert hall."

Contact Karen de Sá at [kdesa@mercurynews.com](mailto:kdesa@mercurynews.com) or 408-920-5781.