

SARAH NEWKIRK & ZACH FRIEND

## Connecting people with food and nature

**O**n May 10, the Santa Cruz County Board of Supervisors heard a presentation from Bryan Largay of the Land Trust of Santa Cruz County, providing a preview of a highly anticipated Community Harvest program at Watsonville Slough Farm.

Purchased in 2010 with support from 10 partner organizations and grants from State Coastal Conservancy and Wildlife Conservation Board, Watsonville Slough Farm was protected with the express goals of both protecting farmland and critical wetland and slough habitat. The property is now managed to advance these two goals, but the Community Harvest program takes it one step further by connecting people with both nature and food production.

The Community Harvest project concept is a product of collaboration between the Land Trust and the community. Over the past several years, the Land Trust introduced the concept to the community in a variety of ways (all in English and Spanish): hosting tours of the farm, releasing videos on its website and via social media, and conducting a survey to gather input from community members about what they would like to see—and not see—at Watsonville Slough Farm. The community expressed significant enthusiasm for nature trails, picnic facilities, bird watching, shopping for produce and attending classes.

The appetite for the project is understandable. Watsonville suffers from a deficit of public open space as compared with North County, as well as an ongoing need for access to locally grown, affordable, organic, healthy fruit and vegetables. Food security is a big concern in the community near the farm: 89% of the students at the adjacent Pajaro Valley

High School are eligible for free and reduced-price meals provided by the school district.

Watsonville Slough Farm is not a singular solution to these larger societal problems, but the Land Trust wants to do its part for the community. The Land Trust's concept—presented at the Board of Supervisors' meeting—envisions a place where guests can harvest fruits and vegetables for their own consumption and for their families, while learning about healthy food and healthy land. Guests will be able to enjoy food on the property at picnic tables, participate in U-pick opportunities, and also have the chance to observe nearby habitats that are vibrant as a result of the sustainable agricultural practices on the farm. Through this program the Land Trust would build awareness about the unique farmland of Santa Cruz County, the economic and environmental sustainability of these lands, and the importance of conserving them for future generations.

It is very exciting to see the conceptual designs take place and reflect the needs and interests of our community, and a second round of community engagement around the designs will be conducted in the summer. There is more to do—final design and engineering, as well as environmental compliance—but the Land Trust expects to break ground on the Community Harvest at Watsonville Slough Farm in 2023.

For information, contact the Land Trust of Santa Cruz County's Bryan Largay at [bryan.largay@landtrustsantacruz.org](mailto:bryan.largay@landtrustsantacruz.org).

---

*Sarah Newkirk is the executive director of the Land Trust of Santa Cruz County, and Zach Friend is a Santa Cruz County supervisor. Their views are their own and not necessarily those of the Pajaronian.*