

## **WILL AMERICA WILL AMERICANS STAND UP FOR PARKS AND OPEN SPACE?**

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**By Huey D. Johnson**

"The Los Altos Hills City Council is discussing the possibility of developing the Byrne Preserve. As Councilman Bob Fenwick said, "It's an extremely valuable piece of property. We could do other things with the money." This is the first time in nearly half a century of environmental work that I've heard of a city developing its parks because it "needs" the money.

That leaves the rest of Los Altos Hills, one of America's wealthiest communities, with a moral decision, a choice between principle and profit. Is there value beyond dollars? That's the question posed by the proposed development of a piece of the Albert Barnitz Byrne Preserve. Byrne was a very principled man, with a love for humanity and wild nature. He was a medical doctor who led a fascinating life. When I met him some 35 years ago, he lived like a hermit in a wild, remote canyon in the brush hills of Texas. He said he lived in isolation because he had contracted tuberculosis and didn't want to spread the contagious disease. (He may have caught the disease when chained in one of Franco's dungeons; he was a surgeon in the Abraham Lincoln Brigade.) He agreed to donate the land that he inherited, but wanted me to promise that it would remain undeveloped forever in its entirety. I promised him that the Nature Conservancy -- the group I represented at the time -- would save the land in perpetuity. The Conservancy sold the 55 acres to the city for a fraction of its value and I put a deed restriction in the title so it could never be developed. Another adjoining 15 acres was given to the city later by another donor. It came with a stable on it. Westwind, the non-profit organization using the stable, helps handicapped children there. The smaller parcel is described as being part of the Byrne Preserve by the city. Dr. Byrne's fears have come to pass now that the land is worth several million dollars an acre. Today's city council might or might not move the barn to the Byrne site. But sell the 15-acre site and tomorrow it will be homes.

That's what happens when a preserve and principles are compromised. Speaking for my organization, Defense of Place, we would oppose any development or sale there, in court and out. I believe The Nature Conservancy would as well.

The question is one of permanence. What is our obligation to continue to preserve parks created by past generations? When we promise to preserve such spaces in perpetuity, how long is forever? How do we respond when the value of land has risen exponentially and the pressure for development increases?

Will Americans be strong enough to stand up for our parks and open spaces, for Yosemite and Yellowstone, for wild rivers and wilderness? Is their value beyond and above money?

This is a global concern. Great Britain, for example, has met such challenges, and matured to the point where no one in that nation would consider development in a park that had been donated for preservation.

New Zealand recently passed a law that puts all of that country's remaining old-growth trees on public lands into permanent preserved status, never to be cut. New Zealand's parliament concluded that there are values that go beyond dollars, and that those forests are too valuable to lose.

In the United States, the city of New York has faced such challenges many times -- so many that Central Park would be layered 17 times over with buildings if all the proposals for development since its creation had been allowed. The preservation of Central Park says volumes about the culture of New York.

And what of the nascent culture of Silicon Valley? Today, the region is widely recognized for its culture of innovation. Tomorrow, will that culture be recognized for its betrayal of past commitments, or for honor?

The British, New Zealanders, and New Yorkers know how to preserve their heritage for the future, and I have no doubt that we are up to the task. That's why I hope you'll agree that we must protect the Albert Byrne Preserve from shortsighted greed. Dr. Byrne and our children deserve nothing less.

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