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Santa Barbara County Buzz Examiner



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Locals say Never! to Neverland memorial for Michael Jackson

July 21st, 2009 5:26 am PT



Any developer tackling Neverland had better bring lots of pixie dust. William Etling photo.

"I am Peter Pan," Michael Jackson told British journalist Martin Bashir, whose "Living with Michael Jackson" helped topple MJ's fantasy kingdom. Any developer tackling the late lost boy's haunted house had best come armed with a big handful of pixie dust.

Fans are clamoring for a memorial. "Moosh" wrote, "They should make Neverland like another Graceland! The farmers in SB/Los Olivos are such ass wipes! They are blocking it from becoming a shrine for MJ." "The Dude" told Business Week, "I hope they turn the whole area into a huge amusement park and annoy the *hit out of all the locals. Rich *ucks, rot in hell."

www.businessweek.com/the_thread/hotproperty/archives/2009/07/neverland_the_n.html

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Los Olivians generally wince at suggestions to make Neverland a permanent memorial to the King Of Pop. Some call it a cynical ploy by greedy ghouls. Others are afraid hordes of well-wishers like those quoted will show up. A newly formed group called Never! rode to the rescue this week, determined to stop any attempt to convert the secluded ranch into a tourist attraction.

"Michael Jackson came to the Santa Ynez Valley for the peace and quiet," said their spokesman, former Valley Planning Advisory Committee chairman Bob Field. "When he lost that, he left, never to return. The vast majority of Valley residents live here for the same reason. Ironically, development of a Graceland-like tourist attraction would destroy precisely what Michael loved about the Valley."

Never!'s mission has support from Buellton Is Our Town, Preservation of Los Olivos, the Santa Rosa Road Ag Alliance, the Santa Ynez Valley Alliance, and the Santa Ynez Valley Concerned Citizens. Residents, farmers, ranchers, and business owners are on board, says the group. The Los Olivos Business Organization issued a separate statement opposing development.

The empty, ghostly ranch sold to Sycamore Valley Ranch, LLC, on November 10, 2008, for \$35 million, and Colony Capital www.colonyinc.com/index2.html is calling the shots. CC boss Tom Barrack says on his web site, "We recently filed a registration statement for a public offering on Colony Financial, Inc., and as a result we are in a legal 'quiet period' and I have been bound, gagged, and ordered to not communicate in a public forum during this time." However, sources familiar with plans for the ranch said July 10, "We have not accepted or rejected any options."

No stranger to local zoning or controversy, the polo fanatic and international real estate mogul has owned various ranches in the Santa Ynez Valley over the last three decades. Barrack was mauled by his neighbors in Happy Canyon for a recent winery proposal, eventually trading away easy public access in exchange for permission to crush.

Colony Capital opened what they now call Sycamore Valley Ranch's doors to a select group of citizens July 9-10. Visitors parked at the Figueroa Mountain Road gates and rode into the sprawling 2,676 acre ranch on jolly red trolleys for a tour and scrumptious repast.

"According to Barrack, if he's speaking straight, and he appeared to be, he's going to turn around and resell it," said one invitee, neighbor Dorothy Alter. "He has no desire to turn it into a Graceland, even though he's done his homework and he knows what Graceland makes." Graceland welcomes over 600,000 visitors each year. www.elvis.com/elvisology/history/elvis_estate.asp

A new buyer may think differently. The Wall Street Journal reported June 13 that the ranch is for sale, valued at \$70 to \$90 million. online.wsj.com/article/SB124484259109711019.html

Historically, Santa Barbara County has been a trail of tears to developers, a graveyard for golf courses, the Bermuda Triangle of blueprints. Land use permits for new tasting rooms in Los Olivos are currently on hold thanks to rowdy inebriates. A links and condo resort near Lompoc went south early in 2009, denied by the Board of Supervisors. Affable octogenarian Fess Parker (Disney's Davy Crockett) took some metaphorical arrows in the back from locals when he proposed a major resort on prime farmland in 2004. Even a Ronald McDonald cancer camp for kids in tony Happy Canyon was roused years ago. Committed conservationists have spent the last decade just tweaking the general plan, and it's still not done.

"A burial site at the ranch would immediately become a tourist attraction, a nuisance and safety concern," said Never! "The number of visitors easily could reach 5,000 to 10,000 per day." The total population of the Santa Ynez Valley is around 22,000.

"This volume of additional visitors would overwhelm the community," says the new group. "The nearest local town is tiny, and it does not have a gas station or a sewer system. The ranch is located in a high fire danger zone, twelve miles from a fire station. It is eleven miles from the nearest sewer system, police station, gas station, and a tiny hospital. The nearest public water supply is five miles away. All of the roads serving the Valley are two-lane rural roads; the narrow and winding five mile road to the ranch is not close to meeting the published County Design

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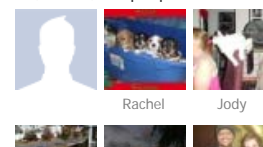
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Standards. It will take years and cost a small fortune to develop the necessary infrastructure, the environmental impacts don't prohibit their development altogether.

"As a prerequisite for this project, the County would have to amend its General Plan to allow, for the first time, urban developments on Ag-zoned properties, county-wide. This longstanding County prohibition is the primary reason that Santa Barbara County has not gone the way of sprawling over-development like other southern California coastal counties. Once this door is opened, there is no good way to predict the number of requests that would come in from developers with dreams of large-scale urban projects on County agricultural lands. It is not legally supportable to treat property owners so differently that these requests could be denied," said Never! They suggest moving the whole thing to Vegas or LA.

The group has a request for the ranch owner: "Please renew, without delay, the land conservation agreement (commonly known as "Williamson Act" contract) with the State of California." Williamson Act contracts are the premier agricultural land conservation tool in the State of California, offering dramatically reduced property taxes in exchange for restricting development for a rolling ten-year period of time. The current contract covering this ranch has been placed under formal notice of non-renewal and, unless it is renewed, will expire in 2012.

"There are no fees associated with reactivating a Williamson contract, it significantly reduces property taxes, and it meets all of the owner's publicly stated goals," said Never! "The Santa Ynez Valley community would be immediately relieved and forever grateful."

Sources familiar with plans for Neverland forwarded a statement July 10, including this: "At the request of the Jackson family, we investigated with the State of California and Santa Barbara County the possibility of interring Mr. Jackson at Neverland. It was preliminarily determined that it would be a long, complex process which could not be culminated within the tight time periods required. Colony has not been a party to current family discussions with regard to Michael's final burial spot...Colony is not currently seeking approvals for a Graceland or Graceland-type option. As you can imagine, plans and thoughts have dramatically changed since Michael's death and we will take time, thought and continued consultation with all concerned parties before any action will be considered. We have no current plans for the property and we have not accepted or rejected any options. The only plan we have at this moment is the continued stewardship, renovation and rejuvenation of this unique asset through its transition. We are not in a hurry and if we do a good job of this and conduct ourselves as a good neighbor in a beautiful valley, the rest will take care of itself."

After being found not guilty of child molestation in 2005, Michael Jackson left town without one wave to the faithful fans gathered at his gates, never to return. He was done with the place, according to the man who tried to revive his career in 2006. Las Vegas dealmaker Jack Wishna told E!, "He said, and I quote, 'I never, never, never want to go back to Neverland, never.' That is the last place on this earth that he wanted to be. If that ever happens, Michael Jackson will come out of the grave like a character in the *Thriller* video, and he will strangle the person that made that decision."

For more info: See William Etling's Sideways in Neverland: Life in The Santa Ynez Valley search.barnesandnoble.com/Sideways-in-Neverland/William-Etling/e/9780595811441/

neverland

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@Neilfan12 1 year ago

I totally disagree. I think Michael should be buried at Neverland AND it should be turned into another Graceland. Sure things soured there in the end for him with the trial, but before that it was his sanctuary and he loved it. His troubles are over, he can rest there again now.

And having him there, with someone else (the new/current owner of Neverland) in charge and/or someone else in the family besides Joe Jackson is the ideal. To have Michael buried at the planned Jackson family museum and arts center would be something Michael would hate even more (as it's his father's new pet project). Michael wouldn't want his father profiting off him again. I'm sure to him that would be much worse than being laid to rest back at Neverland.

Restore Neverland to its past glory & bury Michael there.

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