

Novato Can Keep Its Word on Marin Valley

Novato's seniors finish paying off Marin Valley end of 2027. The city has a lawful way to hand over the keys and still be paid.

Mike Little, Neighbor

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By Mike Little, candidate for Novato City Council, District 2

There is a simple question at the center of the Marin Valley Mobile Country Club dispute:

What happens when the debt used to purchase the property is paid off?

The City's current position, and comments from my opponent, Council member Rachel Farac, appear to point toward the same answer: the City keeps the property.

If I am misunderstanding that position, I welcome clarification. But residents deserve a direct answer.

We hear about appraisals, financial reserves, legal complexities and the difficulty of transferring the property. Those may all be legitimate issues to resolve. But they can also distract from the fundamental question of how this arrangement started and how it was supposed to end.

The historical record is important.

Residents originally wanted to purchase Marin Valley themselves. When they couldn't obtain financing, they asked Novato for help.

Novato's Financing Authority stepped in in 1997. Park revenues supported the acquisition financing. And an official City financial document went even further, stating:

"The Authority anticipates transferring all of its rights, title and interest in the Project to a yet-to-be incorporated 501(c)(3) corporation."

That language matters.

So does what happened afterward.

Residents later created a nonprofit and pursued ownership. And when Marin Valley was transferred to the City in 2011, City staff wrote that the property “was never intended to be or become an asset of the Redevelopment Agency.” The stated purpose of transferring it to the City was to protect the existing agreements and preserve the park and affordable rents.

Yet today, the conversation has shifted toward what the property is worth to the City and what residents would have to pay to acquire it.

I think we’re asking the wrong question.

One thing that experience has taught me is the importance of separating the central issue from all the arguments surrounding it. Something can be legally and financially complicated while the underlying question remains remarkably simple.

This is one of those situations.

Imagine interpreting an old law. You wouldn’t read one sentence in isolation and stop there. You would examine its language, legislative history, circumstances and the problem its authors were trying to solve.

We should examine Marin Valley the same way.

Look at the 1997 documents. Look at the negotiations leading to the acquisition. Look at who was supposed to pay the debt. Look at the anticipated nonprofit transfer. Look at the 2006 ownership proposal. Look at the 2011 staff report. Look at nearly three decades of park revenues supporting this arrangement.

Then answer the question:

Was permanent City ownership actually the intended outcome?

If the answer is no, then “it’s complicated” cannot become the justification for keeping the property indefinitely.

Complexity means we figure out the legal structure, affordability protections, reserves and management necessary to complete the transfer responsibly.

It doesn’t mean we abandon the original intent.

And if City leaders believe Novato should permanently own Marin Valley after the acquisition debt is retired, they should simply say so and explain why.

The residents deserve that clarity.

My position is clear: before Novato treats Marin Valley as a permanent City asset, we need a complete examination of what the original deal was intended to accomplish. If the historical record confirms that nonprofit ownership was the intended destination, then our job is to find a responsible way to finish the deal, not reasons why we can’t.