

# S.F. neighbors fighting startup school that's uprooting tiny farm

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Photo: Liz Hafalia, The Chronicle

Neighbors Kerry Evensong (left), David Hooper (middle), and Nancy Huff (right) show and talk about the Little City Farm site in San Francisco, California, on Tuesday, November 10, 2015. A private school, Golden Bridges School, is proposing to build its campus on the Little City Farm site in the Excelsior.

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A school startup steeped in the ideology of environmental sustainability and social justice, Golden Bridges School says it is dedicated to “outdoor education” and “hands-on interaction with nature.”

But to residents of the Mission Terrace neighborhood in San Francisco’s Outer Mission District, the private school represents something quite different: a property owner with plans to oust Little City Gardens, San Francisco’s only commercial farm.

## **S.F. DEVELOPMENT**

Transbay agency sells development parcel for \$165 million Public space included in the proposed 5M project. 5M developer alters project to include more affordable housing Dia de los Muertos flags hang above new housing construction at 1050 Valencia St.

with old buildings reflected in a store front window, in San Francisco, CA Friday, November 6, 2015. Mission market-rate housing battle not over despite Prop. 1 loss

The fledgling private school, currently housed in a Mission District apartment and a Diamond Heights church, is moving forward with plans to develop a campus at 203 Cotter St., a 1-acre, bow-tie-shaped slice of green space that cuts through the center of a residential block.

The school paid \$1.2 million for the property two years ago, buying it from a developer who had hoped to build condominiums there but gave up because of neighborhood opposition. The school, which must now raise another \$6.5 million to build a four-building complex on the property, according to its website, has allowed the farm to occupy the land rent-free.

While the school plans to preserve two-thirds of the property as open space, the proposal doesn't include Little City Gardens, which over the past seven years has transformed a derelict, fennel-choked strip into a busy farm that sells produce and flowers to high-end places like Tartine Bakery and Bi-Rite Market.

Little City co-founder Caitlyn Galloway, who worked with Assemblyman Phil Ting, D-San Francisco, to pass a law allowing commercial farms in residential neighborhoods, said she has been grateful that Golden Bridges has allowed her to continue to farm the land but is disappointed at the prospect of losing it.

"It should be made clear that no one here is making a lot of money," she said. "What we are trying to do is grow vegetables and flowers in order to sustain the farm itself financially and in order to compensate ourselves modestly for our labor. The educational component to this operation is incredibly important."

"We just don't have that much open space left, and there is no turning back once the space is developed, whether it's condos or a school," Galloway said.

The land-use battle in Mission Terrace, a planned community of about 1,500 single-family homes built in the 1920s, shows how the city's booming economy and swelling development pipeline pits even like-minded institutions against one another. In a city where the median price of a home is north of \$1 million, every lot is a potential fight, even those neglected for decades.

## **Plot of land reborn**

"It was undervalued. It was debris-strewn. And the neighbors had turned their back on it," said resident David Hooper, who heads up the New Mission Terrace Improvement Association. "Now, because of the work Little City has done, the neighbors relate to it and to each other. Neighbors who wouldn't talk to each other will meet there at the farm. You look out the window and you can't help but smile."

A well-organized group of neighbors has taken up the cause of the farm. Along the 100 and 200 blocks of Cotter Street, most of the homes have yellow "Save the Farm" placards in the windows. The neighbors have established the Mission Terrace Land Preservation Committee and are gathering signatures and monitoring the environmental review of the project being conducted by the city Planning Department.

Residents say that not only do they appreciate Little City, they also worry that the school would be a traffic and parking nightmare. They also say developing the property, which sits in the bottom of a slight valley east of Interstate 280, would exacerbate an overburdened sewer system that regularly backs up during big rainstorms because the rainwater now absorbed by the farm's tilled soil would run into the sewer system.

"We are at loggerheads — there is nothing about the current proposal that we find acceptable," said Nancy Huff, who lives across the street from the farm.

The school says it will manage the traffic and denies that the sewer system will be overtaxed. The school, which is inspired by the Waldorf educational philosophy, will provide bioswales to remove silt and pollution from surface runoff water, a green roof, and possibly a cistern to collect water for irrigation and for toilet, dishwasher and laundry systems.

Part of the bad blood between residents and the school stems from a discrepancy between the plan presented at a December 2014 neighborhood meeting and the one eventually submitted to the city. Neighbors say they left that meeting with the impression that the school intended to put up one structure to accommodate 40 to 50 students and preserve much of Little City Gardens.

## **Neighbors surprised**

It was not until several months later, neighbors said, that they learned the campus would include four buildings and that there would be closer to 200 students. And then the school made it clear that Little City was not part of the plan.

“We felt duped,” Huff said. “We felt like they were trying to piggyback on the goodwill that Little City Gardens generated in the neighborhood.”

Golden Bridges co-founder and administrator Jessie Elliot said she never intended to give neighbors the impression the school would be limited to one building and 50 kids. She admits to being a complete novice in city planning and development.

“That was a miscommunication,” Elliot said. “I did get up and say there would be one building and 50 students. But I can’t imagine that I didn’t also say that we are going eventually to be a K-8 school. I had no idea what the process entailed. I didn’t know it would take three years to get approvals.”

As far as traffic, the school is planning a chaperoned “walking school bus” where older students are dropped off at nearby Balboa Park and then walk to school. In addition, the school is talking to the city about possibly putting a school white drop-off zone on a nonresidential strip by Balboa Park on San Jose Avenue. While neighbors are skeptical that parents will actually drop their kids off almost three-quarters of a mile from the school, Elliot said similar systems are in place at other schools.

“The drop-off at Balboa will not be optional — it will be a requirement,” Elliot said. “We are committed to being a good neighbor — it’s a big part of who we are. We are all about community and community engagement. We are trying our best to address neighborhood concerns.”

Golden Bridges opened in February 2013 as a small part-time preschool. The next year it expanded to full time and added a kindergarten. It has since added a first grade and now has 56 students, with another 17 in the preschool. It will continue to add a new class each year.

## **Conflicting visions**

Elliot said that the school had wanted to include Little City in the development, but it became clear that the visions of the school and the farm, while similar, were not quite aligned. She said that the school’s vision of an “educational garden” was different than Little City’s experiment in creating a self-sustaining commercial farm.

Galloway, who works as a sign painter as well as an urban farmer, made it clear that she is staying out of the fight and is not involved in the “Save the Farm” movement. But she took issue with the school’s argument that they are “saving the farm but transforming it to an educational rather than commercial one.”

Galloway also disagrees with the school’s argument that its acquisition of the parcel saved it from being developed as condominiums. The long, narrow shape of the site and lack of a second means of egress make it an impractical place to build housing, which explains the fact that for decades residential developers looked at building there, but never did.

## **Little City’s investment**

While Little City has not been paying rent to the school, it has invested a lot of sweat equity and money in plants, seeds and compost.

“What we have done is come onto the land and acted as free groundskeepers and land stewards and increased the property value by activating what was before a blighted space,” Galloway said.

Supervisor John Avalos, who represents the area, has yet to take a position on the project; if approved by the Planning Department, it could be appealed to the Board of Supervisors.

He said Golden Bridges School, which has a “pay what you can” approach, “has a really great model,” but that the neighbors have long eyed that parcel for open space.

“They’ve wanted a park and have been fine with the farm, but they are concerned that the school is going to be much more impactful on the neighborhood,” he said.

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