

Big Wave breaks ground

By Sarah Wright

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Big Wave Project CEO Jeff Peck speaks Saturday to a small, socially distanced crowd on the site of a long-planned mixed-use facility on the Midcoast.

Golden shovel in hand, Joey Sayles smiled and dug out the first chunk of dirt at the site of what he hopes will be his new home in just over a year.

Saturday marked the groundbreaking of the Big Wave Project, a \$23 million residential and commercial space near the Half Moon Bay Airport centered on serving a community of adults with developmental disabilities. It's been 20 years in the making, and Jeff Peck, CEO of the nonprofit Big Wave Project, hosted a small, socially distanced event on Saturday to celebrate. It was the first physical step to creating a space that provides affordable housing, jobs and a community for people with disabilities unsure of their futures after their caregivers are gone, he said.

“That’s what it was in 1999; that’s what it is today,” Peck said. “It hasn’t changed an iota.”

The first phase of the planned development, located between Pillar Ridge and Princeton, includes 33 residential units above community space and retail on the ground floor, as well as 176,000 square feet of office buildings and a wellness center. Peck said the first part of construction will involve installing utilities. He expects construction to be complete in around 14 months, when he hopes a full ribbon cutting ceremony can take place.

Saturday’s event focused on the residents who will eventually live at Big Wave and the long struggle of getting the project through the approval process. It’s set to join just a handful of “intentional communities” across the United States. Twenty-three of the units, which Peck said are made affordable by the commercial aspects of the development and donations, have already found owners.

But the project has faced myriad obstacles — including intense pushback from some locals and initial denial by the California Coastal Commission — since its ideation in 1999. Many of the future residents, like Sayles, have been part of the fight since the beginning.

Matt Hearn has been there since he was 16 and playing on Peck's Special Olympics basketball team. That is how so many of the families got to know each other — and with the establishment of the Big Wave Farm adjacent to the future housing, their community has only grown. For Hearn and so many other of the future residents, the building project isn't about creating a community; the Big Wave community already exists. Now, its members will finally have a safe place to live.

Hearn said the two decades of often contentious permitting discussions have been frustrating, but he said the clear need for affordable housing for people like him with developmental disabilities — people who aren't able to live independently — kept him going.

“You can have the well-meaning projects get exhausted by all that,” Hearn said.

Hearn's uncle Jim said being part of the Big Wave community has helped his nephew's confidence and social and intellectual growth, and has helped him pursue his passion. He's studying psychology and breaking into peer mentorship. His brother Daniel agreed.

“It was shocking,” Daniel Hearn said. “We had grown apart, and now he had this community. It was his community, and he was showing it to me.”

San Mateo County Supervisor Dave Pine also spoke at the event, and praised Supervisor Don Horsley, who was unable to attend, for advocating for the project. He also commended the perseverance of the community through years of hurdles.

“I so wish that it could have been easier,” Pine said. “I think it's incumbent on everyone involved in the regulatory community to think about next time a project comes along, how can we make it easier.”

During the ceremony, Peck pointed out a row of red flags alongside the stage, which represented members of the Big Wave community who were turned away from the event

because of restrictions due to the COVID-19 pandemic. Peck said although the road has been long and hard, the strength of the community shines brightest.

“This is the curse and the blessing,” Peck said. “The curse is it took 21 years to do, which is obscene. The blessing is that our community has just gotten stronger and stronger over those years.”