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La Sierra Decision Put on Hold

Riverside City Council forms a group to study the proposed housing development.

August 27, 2003 | Seema Mehta | Times Staff Writer

Listening to residents' pleas, the Riverside City Council on Tuesday voted to hold off on a proposal to build more than 700 homes in the Rancho La Sierra area, land restricted by voter-approved growth measures on the western city limits along the Santa Ana River.

Instead the council voted to form a group that will report to the council in about four months.

City officials had said the parcel has become a magnet for dumping, graffiti and other illicit activities and that a housing development would benefit both the city and the landowners.

The developer, the Davis Group of Encino, wants to build 729 homes on 445 acres while setting aside 750 surrounding acres as open space, including the Norco Hills.

At the council meeting Tuesday night, more than 150 residents vociferously opposed the new proposal and cheered each speaker who argued against it and in favor of growth restrictions voters adopted in the 1970s and 1980s. The public discussion, ranging from voters' intent to crowded roads and schools, continued late into the night.

"The reason I'm here is: Are you guys nuts?" resident Stephanie Easton asked the council. "Stick with the [original] plan; it's a much better one."

Another opponent, Riverside County Supervisor Bob Buster, who served seven years on the Riverside City Council, said the proposal violates restrictions on developing agricultural and hillside lands that voters approved in 1978 and 1987.

"What the city wants to do is sacrifice the most publicly usable and valuable piece of land to complete development and only gain this open space in steep and inaccessible areas that are hardly usable by the public and can be acquired by other means," Buster said. "That's a really poor bargain."

Under the growth-control measures, development on the 605-acre parcel in Rancho La Sierra known as the River Ranch must be limited to 121 homes, Buster said.

The proposal before the city would increase the development allowed on Rancho La Sierra. In exchange, the city would add more acreage to the Rancho La Sierra project's zoning boundaries, and 750 acres of scenic hillsides, river buffer and other wildlife areas would be preserved.

But some residents said this compensation was not good enough.

"I think we need to not mitigate; we need to follow the letter of the law," said Riverside native Maggie Souder.

However, Ventura land-use attorney Katherine E. Stone told city officials the proposal is consistent with voter-approved land-use initiatives Proposition R, from 1978, and Measure C, from 1987, because neither prohibited expanding the project area and grouping the allowable development onto one location, she said.

The proposal meets the goals of both measures "by ensuring that over 600 acres are retained as permanent public open space to be developed with multipurpose trails and preserved for wildlife protection," Stone wrote in an Aug. 21 letter to the mayor and council. "The conceptual plan for the River Ranch ... represents smart growth concepts."

Concerns that adopting this proposal would set a precedent for transferring development into other rural areas are unfounded, Stone said.

The opponents strongly disagreed and said that if the city wanted to change the zoning for the area, it should put the matter before the voters or expect a lawsuit.

"I not only meant what I voted, I know exactly what is good for my community -- that is, sane and controlled growth," said Yolanda Garland, a 35-year Riverside resident. "When is our voice and our vote going to be heard?"

Buster urged the council to preserve the River Ranch as recreational land and open space, saying it offers a sorely needed escape from urban life.

"It's a really unique spot and just cries out for this kind of use rather than paving it over forever," he said.

However, on Tuesday, city staff members urged the council to endorse the plan in concept.

If that occurs, the Davis Group will submit a development proposal, and city staff will begin working on a general plan amendment. The proposal will need several council approvals, a process that will take from 18 months to two years, said John A. Swiecki, principal planner for the city.

"This road is just beginning," he said. "Nothing is ... locked in."