

'Desert Rose' residents look to head off development project

By Wehtahnah Tucker

OLIVENHAIN — "Save Desert Rose," a group of citizens that have long opposed a planned development are gearing up for another battle as the project developer is slated to go before the Planning Commission in late October.

The group contends that the residential development is uncharacteristic of the rural surroundings, environmentally unsustainable and presents a host of other concerns.

The group has mobilized hundreds of supporters in the community as well as in Carlsbad where the impacts of increased traffic from the development will be felt.

"Aside from the fact that the proposed development is absolutely not in keeping with the character of Olivenhain, it presents a multitude of undesirable side effects," said Bill Butler who lives near the planned 16-home community proposed by Woodbridge Farms Estates, LLC. "Not the least of which include safety, increased traffic on narrow streets, erosion and water quality."

The history of the residential development within the city's most rural community is complex. Located at the end of a series of narrow, winding roads, the 6-acre parcel on Desert Rose Way was sold a few years ago to AJ Pacific Homes.

"When this development was originally presented to the community, it was

done so as an 8-unit community that had lot sizes and setbacks that are consistent with the local zoning requirements," Butler said.

"However, the situation with the real estate market and the economy in general, the concept and plan became fiscally unsound," he opined. "No longer could the builder contemplate

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Everett Delano

Attorney representing Save Desert Rose

building eight very large and expensive homes that would not be marketable in these economic times," Butler said.

Calls to the developer were not returned.

Scott Vurbuff, the city's environmental coordinator said the mitigated negative declaration was published Dec. 6, 2010. The staff subsequently requested the applicant hire a third party to conduct a peer review of the fire protection plan of the project. The original project plan was submitted in 2007.

Based on the plans presented by the applicant, staff determines if the project is exempt from environmental review or if it requires an environmental initial study.

As a result of those findings, either a negative declaration, mitigated negative declaration or full environmental impact study is required, Vurbuff explained.

"In this project we noticed there was reason to mitigate potential significant impacts (to the area)," he said.

The mitigation measures speak to reducing corresponding significant impacts. Biological

resources, such as habitat and the nearby wetlands were cited as in danger of being impacted by the project, Vurbuff said.

"The new plan includes homes that are set back only 5-feet from the property lines, double the number of homes, an 8-foot, non-flammable perimeter wall, unstable soils, inadequate buffers for the wetlands and a number of safety concerns," Butler said. "Unfortunately, it is we, the residents of the neighborhood, who will have to pay the price for their (developers) bad business decision."

Attorney Everett Delano was hired by the "Save Desert Rose" group in January 2011. The negative declaration prepared by city planning department was both incomplete and incorrect in that it "downplayed the impacts of the project," according to Delano. Both the scope of the project was mischaracterized and the character of the existing community, he said. "There's some pretty significant issues in this development."

"It's my view that they should do more," he added.

The group is seeking a full environmental impact report rather than a mitigated negative declaration review.

"We place a premium on a community that is defined by its rural character and is free of some of the symbols of urbanization like sidewalks, street lamps, traffic lights," Butler said. "A community where trails are the links between neighbors; trails that are shared by walkers, people on horseback, bicyclists, joggers, gentle athletes, our four-legged friends and children walking to school."

Dr. Fred Frumin, an Olivenhain resident agreed. "This development is everything we didn't move here for," he said. "The community wants to preserve its character and I'm willing to help with that."

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