

Project fails to win over planners

20-YEAR SUPPLY OF WATER UNCERTAIN, COMMISSION SAYS

NIPOMO

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THE TRIBUNE

The big Woodlands development planned for the Nipomo Mesa was dealt a setback Thursday when the county Planning Commission refused to certify that the project has enough water to last for 20 years.

Even before the hearing ended, representatives of The Woodlands' developers indicated they planned to appeal that decision to the Board of Supervisors.

Under a state law that took effect in January, any new development with 500 or more homes must obtain certification that there's enough water to supply its needs for 20 years.

The Woodlands includes 1,320 homes, a 500-room hotel, 45 holes of golf, a business park and a commercial village.

It's the first development in the county to go through the water verification process since the new law took effect.

After listening to five hours of often highly technical testimony, a majority of commissioners said they were not convinced there is enough water to serve The Woodlands or other current and future projects on the Nipomo Mesa.

"I feel our primary responsibility is to the existing residents of this county," Commissioner Cynthia Boche said. "I'd like to

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see us living within our means to the extent we can."

The vote against certification was 3-1, with Wayne Cooper casting the sole vote favoring the development. South County Commissioner Gene Mehlschau of Nipomo was absent.

The Woodlands plans to rely entirely on the Santa Maria groundwater basin for its water, and that's been a sore point with the Nipomo Community Services District.

The agency is afraid the development will deplete the basin to such an extent that additional water will have to be imported to supply Nipomo residents. The district now relies solely on groundwater for its supply.

District officials say its ratepayers would be forced to foot the bill, and there would be nothing requiring The Woodlands to help pay for the imported water.

The district's consulting engi-

neer, Jim Garing, said the Nipomo Mesa already has pumping depressions — areas where the groundwater level has dropped — and those will only get worse when The Woodlands starts withdrawing water.

Tim Cleath, The Woodlands' water expert, countered that groundwater from the Santa Maria Valley will flow toward the mesa to bring the basin into equilibrium.

But the water attorney for the Nipomo services district said farmers and urban water users in Santa Maria won't stand for that.

The Santa Maria groundwater basin already is the subject of a big water rights lawsuit involving more than 1,000 parties.

Nipomo district officials have argued that The Woodlands can't assert any legal claim to the basin until that case is settled, but the county's water attorney, Janet Goldsmith, disagrees.

The county's hands could be tied for a decade or more if it were to wait for the lawsuit to end, she said in a letter.

Tollets: Low-flow device becomes an issue. Page A6