

Controversial Nipomo project gets green light

By Randi Block/Staff Writer

The long and contentious story of 16-home project on the Nipomo Mesa is nearing the final chapter.

The San Luis Obispo County Planning Commission approved Thursday a tentative subdivision tract map for Ken Craig's residential development, at the northwest corner of Willow and Via Concha roads near The Woodlands development.

In addition to developing homes on the property, Craig also deeded 21 acres of the property to Lucia Mar Unified School District for a possible future middle school, but it's not clear when that would happen.

Save the Mesa, a South County environmental and development watchdog group, has fought the project through the four-year plans because, group members say, the project needs more environmental review on such issues as traffic and water.

Carol Florence of Oasis Design and Craig's representative lobbied for support Thursday and said it was time to allow the project to move forward.

"We want you to put closure to a project that has been the recipient of a substantial amount of scrutiny," she said.

County planners recommended that Craig be required to develop a trail along Willow Road for public use, and while four of the commissioners supported the plan, 5th District Commissioner Sarah Christie said it didn't go far enough.

She asked for commissioners to include the South County Advisory Council's request - that a public-use trail be developed around the project's perimeter. Without adequate support for that plan, Christie said she couldn't vote in favor the project.

"We had an opportunity to provide some benefits to the public," she said. "But at the end of the day, what it is, is an urban sprawl, large-lot development, which is being proposed in an area where water is in overdraft, and there is no affordable housing and no public recreational component (as part of the project)."

Fourth District Commissioner Eugene Mehlschau, who represents Nipomo, said he was satisfied with the trail proposed by the county, because it complied with the newly adopted county Parks and Recreation Element.

Another issue that was flushed out at the hearing was whether the project had secured an agreement from the Nipomo Community Services District to supply the homes with water and sewer service. The district approved the project's annexation to the district last year, but had not issued Craig a formal "intent to serve" letter.

However, NCSD Director Mike Winn said that to approve the annexation without intending to service the project would have been "silly" and it's just a matter of the developers applying for the formal document.

“We do expect them and they will be taking supplemental water and paying those fees as all development does in the district,” Winn said.

He estimated that those fees would be \$13,500 per home that's developed, but that amount could change significantly if the estimated price tag to bring in supplemental water fluctuates. Originally the district was looking at a \$6 million supplemental water pipeline project, but those costs have recently skyrocketed to more than \$24 million.

Thursday marked the last scheduled public hearing for Craig's project, unless the commission's decision is appealed to the county Board of Supervisors. However, the project's primary foe, Save the Mesa, is not planning to fight the commission's decision, said Marianne Buckmeyer, group president.

With approval of his project, Craig said he expects construction on the first houses to begin in six to eight months and anticipates people will be living on the property in the first part of 2008.

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