

# Review of 189-home plan under way

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SAN MARCOS — The push to build a 189-home subdivision on the north end San Marcos is moving forward, with a new environmental review under way, even as the proposal continues to face sharp opposition from neighboring homeowners.

A draft review of San Marcos Highlands should be done by the end of the year, and then will be released for a 45-day public-comment period. The Highlands proposal could hit the city's Planning Commission for a vote next spring, and the City Council after that.

At a city-sponsored workshop last week, the project's consultants updated the small crowd of people — primarily opponents — as to the status of the project, which over the last year has shrunk by nine homes and added more open space.

In its most current form, the Highlands plan would see development of about 50 acres of 293 acres at the north end of Las Posas Road, which would be slightly extended and would slice the housing development into two parts.

The project — being proposed by property owner Farouk Kubba and his Vista San Marcos LLC — would include three small parks, a 22-acre passive park intertwined with a trail, as well as roughly four miles of other trails.

The development's smaller homes, with minimum lots of 5,000-square-feet, would sit to the west of Las Posas. The larger homes, with lots that could reach up to nearly 20,700-square-feet, would be in the foothills on the east side of the road.

Opponents fear the project will mar the ridgeline, and would also bring unacceptable traffic increases and too many students to schools. More than 500 people have signed a petition against the development.

"It's the last big chunk of open space. Once its developed, it's gone," said Kevin Mecum, resident of the neighboring Santa Fe Hills development. Mecum is among those spearheading opposition to the development.

Matt Simmons, a consultant for the developer and a San Marcos native, said he thinks the project fits guidelines that city leaders set in place long ago.

"San Marcos was steel buildings and chicken coops when I was a kid," Simmons said. "Now we have a great network of parks and trails and businesses, and I am proud to raise my kids here."

Simmons said that the landowner has listened to the opposition and made changes, including shrinking the project's footprint to leave more open space. He also noted that the landowner plans to preserve and restore upward of 200 acres of habitat land, including removal of invasive plant species, and said that the project has provisional approvals from the three environmental agencies governing it.

Plans to build on the site have been around for years, as have the same challenges to those plans.

Kubba bought the property in 1981. Nine years later, the City Council approved his development proposal for 275 homes, but that project was held up when the economy soured and when the adjacent 1,600-home Santa Fe Hills project (then called Paloma) by another developer ran into financial trouble.

In 1999, when the Highlands project was ready to move forward, it hit resistance from neighbors and wildlife agencies with complaints ranging from traffic to changing the rural character of the area to environmental impacts to the extension of Las Posas to Buena Creek.

In 2002, the council approved Kubba's request to build 230 homes. But by 2006, with no work done, the city refused to give extensions to its approval and the project once again hit the skids.

Last year, Kubba's project was revived — with a bid this time to build 198 homes. More than a year later, the number of proposed homes has shrunk even further, to 189 homes, to allow for a little more open space.

Also within the last year, Kubba has agreed to help pay for extra lanes at the nearby state Route 78/Las Posas Road freeway interchange.

If Highlands gets the OK, the developer would extend Las Posas about a half-mile. Long-term traffic circulation plans from regional agencies call for someday punching the road through to Buena Creek Road — but that extension is not part of the Highlands project.

Mecum said that if the Highlands development is halted, he believes the plans to eventually extend Las Posas all the way to Buena Creek would be less likely to come to fruition. He and opponents said they don't want to see Las Posas reach Buena Creek, because drivers will use it as a shortcut, and thus increase traffic.

Simmons disagreed, saying that if governing agencies want the connection to Buena Creek to happen, it will happen regardless of whether Highlands is built, if the traffic demands require it.

Then there is the battle over the ridgelines. A portion of the development would require a permit to built some homes in what is called the ridgeline overlay zone.

Simmons said the plan “completely complies” with the city’s ridgeline requirements, and said the homes would be 197 feet below the lowest point of the top of the ridge — 97 feet lower than the line where construction is barred.

Mecum said that the consultants are “totally downplaying it,” and that the proposal goes against the spirit of a 2008 vote by city residents to limit ridgeline construction.

A bit less than half Kubba’s land — 141 acres — sits in the city of San Marcos. The Highlands project complies with the city’s general plan, and has been on projected maps since the 1980s.

But the remaining 152 acres sits in the county, in an area now zoned for one house every ten acres — it had been, just a few years ago, one house per acre. Kubba wants San Marcos to annex the county land.

Mecum said he and fellow opponents are hoping the regional agency with the authority to OK the annexation will reject the bid.

That group, the Local Agency Formation Commission, asked for a full environmental review of the development. That is the review expected to be done in draft form by the end of the year.

Area resident Sandra Farrell, who has opposed the project for years, said this week that people were glad to see a full environmental review in the works.

“Let’s just hope they do a decent document,” she said.

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