Are housing projects crowding Torrance?

Locals fear that high-density residential units may bring even more traffic congestion to an already busy area.

By Nick Green
Staff Writer

An imposing 3 1/2 story edifice containing 59 pastel-colored condominiums aimed at seniors called Parkview Court is rising on just 1.15 acres in Torrance at the corner of Oak and Jefferson streets.

Immediately next door on Jefferson, a crane looms over the wood frames of what city officials describe as one of the densest developments in the city in the past decade. Named The Foundry Lofts, the project will boast 86 four-story condominiums on just 1.9 acres.

And next door on Oak, residents already are moving into the largest of the trio of housing developments that occupies a 13-acre site.

The Village on Oak is a 198-unit town house project that also has a second phase of 33 town houses that will be built next year on the present site of the Rolling Hills Prep Gym.

The 376 homes jammed into just overmore than 16 acres of former industrial land opposite Wilson Park is unusually dense by Torrance standards, generating calls to the city from startled residents as construction progresses.

Todd Hayes, co-president of the Old Torrance Neighborhood Association, describes the development as the “poster child” for precisely the type of housing subdivisions many residents don’t want to see.

“I think, like most people, it just seems like a big development behemoth,” he said.

“It may be it got out of control,” he added. “What started as a ‘let’s clean up the neighborhood’ idea morphed into what we’ve been railing against ever since.”

The first 276 homes were approved in 2003, years before political sentiment turned against rezoning industrial and commercial land for housing. The remainder were added two years later when the scope of the project was enlarged.

Four years ago, city officials were eager to embrace transforming an eyesore of heavy manufacturing plants into tidy suburbia.

“This area is really ripe for transition,” Councilwoman Hope Witkowsky said when the City Council approved the project in October 2003. “I think this sleepy little area lends itself to this kind of project.”

Except that critics point out there’s nothing “sleepy” about the neighborhood. The park and its array of recreational facilities across Jefferson is one of Torrance’s busiest, home to the annual Independence Day celebration that leaves vehicles parked on streets for blocks in every direction.

In addition, thousands of shoppers come to the farmers market on Tuesdays and Saturdays, jamming surrounding streets with cars, especially on weekends.

Across Oak Street is Torrance First Presbyterian Church, a so-called megachurch that is one of the South Bay's largest, where more than 5,000 worshippers attend Sunday services.

And the almost 400 homes are being plopped down into an area with limited vehicle access.

Jefferson dead-ends at Wilson Park, although it's possible to weave through the park's parking lot to reach Plaza del Amo.

There is no traffic signal where Oak intersects with busy Carson Street, a major commuter artery that makes left turns from Oak virtually impossible.

And the signal at Jefferson and Crenshaw Boulevard, a few yards from another traffic light where Plaza del Amo meets Crenshaw, is a notoriously familiar bottleneck to Torrance motorists.

"You've just created a nightmare — and they're still building," said Councilman Bill Sutherland, who was elected last year on a platform of stopping what he perceived as rampant residential construction.

"There's only two ways in and out (of the area)," he added. "That's going to be the biggest downfall."

So dense are The Foundry Lofts, the crane is needed to move materials around because of the lack of space on the building site. That's a common sight in densely populated Europe, but not so in the U.S.

The development of 86 one-and-two bedroom condominiums is "more urban, something you'd see in the city," conceded an employee with developer Standard Pacific, who asked not to be identified in accordance with company policy.

While those 86 units are crammed onto a lot of under two acres, the entire tract averages out to 23.5 units to the acre.

"It isn't as dense as people think it is," said former Torrance Councilman Don Lee, who served as a consultant on the project and was elected to the Torrance school board last week.

Still, for some, the trio of housing developments is too much for suburban Torrance.

"It's not too dense for everywhere; it's too dense for Torrance," Sutherland said. "We want single-family homes."

Of course, not everyone can afford a single-family home in a city where the median price of one is north of more than $675,000, according to Altos Research, which provides analyses of real estate markets.

“The density and the three-story height is the reason we can offer prices in the $300,000 range,” said John Mavar, project manager for West Millennium Homes’ Parkview Court.

About one-third of the one-bedroom homes for seniors that start at $319,000 are already reserved, he said.

Prices are not yet set for The Foundry Lofts and sales won’t start until next year.

Prices of the town homes at The Village on Oak start at $547,000. “Price was a big selling point,” said Greg Wong, 35, a graphic designer who recently moved into a two-bedroom condo in the subdivision. “It didn’t really click it was going to be so dense.”

Wong, who grew up in Rolling Hills, said he likes his new home, but is already experiencing problems critics say will only get worse as more residents move in.

Traffic congestion on Saturday and Sunday morning is severe.

It’s a good thing he customarily turns right onto Carson Street to head to the freeway because turning left is “ugly,” Wong said.

And guest parking is extremely limited.

With six homes sharing a common driveway inside the development, neighborly relations are a must, he said.

“I’ve met almost everybody,” Wong said. “You have to get along with everybody. It’s almost mandatory.”

Wong’s neighbor, Mike Martinet, 60, moved with his wife to the development from an older condo they owned in the Hollywood Riviera section of Torrance.

He, too, simply accepts the density as an inescapable reality.

“Everything is dense, but it’s well-planned,” he said. “It’s the wave of the future. There is no land left, especially in densely populated areas like the South Bay.”

Still, he also wonders what the traffic will be like in the area once the development is fully occupied.

But some residents — especially in the senior project — will undoubtedly be like the 75-year-old mother of Torrance resident Esther Kimm.

“It’s very convenient for my mom because her church is right next door and the farmers market is right there,” Kimm said. “She doesn’t have a car and those are the two places she goes to the most.”

Sean Doyle, project manager of The Village on Oak, said many of the buyers are from the South Bay, where smaller, new homes are difficult to find. Mavar agreed.

“I’m finding most (buyers) are local residents who have been watching the construction as it progressed,” he said. “I’m specifically looking at empty nesters downsizing.”

Former Councilman Mike Mauno originally voted against approving the residential development, but not because of its density. He didn’t like the proximity to industrial uses.

By the time that was removed in 2005 and the 86 units of The Foundry Lofts and the second phase of The Village on Oak was added, he voted in favor of it.

“There’s a big need for senior units,” he said. “Many parents, like my father, now are empty nesters and they have these three- and four-bedroom homes and they’d like to stay in the area.”

Like Mauno, Mayor Frank Scotto also changed his vote on the project — but in the opposite direction.

In 2003, he voted in favor of the residential development. Two years later, as the project grew — and the mayoral campaign neared — he switched his vote to a no.

“Its one of those ones you wish you had back or wish you could do over again,” he said. “(Initially,) it seemed like it was a good project. The second time around it was obvious it was too large. … The end result is, it’s going to create an enormous amount of traffic.”

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USER COMMENTS (5 of 15 total | **view all**)

"Over Developing all our cities!"

I feel for you Torrance residents but this is happening all over Los Angeles! Venice, Santa Monica, Culver City, and The Marina Del Rey are now just traffic nightmares! As long as these mass develpors have the money the city counsel members will approve them! Check their re-election accounts....where is the money coming from.....i would be curious to know?
- Audrey

posted: Wednesday, November 14th at 9:41 AM

"Torrance has ruined itself."

The original concept for Torrance was for a balance of 1/3 residential, 1/3 industrial, and 1/3 agricultural. It was a concept that was embodied into the city seal. However and postwar, through both shortsightedness, stupidity, a midwestern based insecurity, and pure greed - you could buy a city councilman with a load of lumber, literally - Torrance steadily moved away from that balanced concept towards unmanageable urban sprawl. An increasingly gridlocked mess - Hawthorne Blvd. traffic is always awful - people in the beach cities will avoid it if at all possible. Heedless boosterism has taken its toll, and there's no way back unfortunately.
- VICB3

posted: Wednesday, November 14th at 9:34 AM

"NO MORE HOUSING OF ANY KIND"

Bringing in more people to Torrance by building more homes of any kind does not make Torrance a better place to live, but a very frustrating place making those who have been here a long time wanting to leave. Let's build something for the people to enjoy, but not something to crowd us all in like sardines. Why not make our school a better place for our children - the schools are in poor shape. If education is important than let's do something to help education in Torrance for all ages.
- Shirley

posted: Wednesday, November 14th at 9:17 AM

"MORE CONDOS"

WHEN I LIVED IN KANSAS, DEVELOPERS KNOW BETTER THAN TO BUILD CONDOS. THEY ARE FROWNED ON VICIOUSALLY, THE NEIGHBORHOOD WILL WAIT FOR THE DEVELOPERS TO GET THE STICKS UP AND THEN THE PEOPLE OF THE NEIGHBORHOOD BRING OUT THE MATCHES & LIGHTERS.....RIGHT ON KANSAS.
- ELEANOR

posted: Wednesday, November 14th at 9:00 AM

"No One Mentioned How Ugly They Are"

These things that are sprouting up all over Torrance, like weeds, are ugly. The ones that they built at Cabrillo and Sepulveda, behind the Jack in the Box? I call those "the prison". They're depressing and remind me of a prison. The ones on Earl street are ugly too. And, the behemoths by Wilson Park. Torrance is going to go downhill and become a less desirable place to live with all this overcrowding, high density ugly housing and the traffic.

posted: Wednesday, November 14th at 8:48 AM