

Debate begins again over Ponte Vista

By Donna Littlejohn, Staff Writer

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It's been nearly a year since a citizens panel gave a resounding thumbs-down to the proposed Ponte Vista housing development in San Pedro.

Now the debate is about to resume.

On Thursday, city planners will hold a public hearing to take testimony as they prepare to make a formal recommendation this fall on the project.

"This is a hearing for the public to tell us what they think about the project," said Jim Tokunaga, project manager with the Los Angeles Planning Department. "This is not a decision-making meeting, there will be no decisions made. All we're doing is taking public testimony."

The hearing starts at 5 p.m. at the Cabrillo Marine Aquarium Auditorium, 3720 Stephen M. White Drive, San Pedro.

"I anticipate hundreds and hundreds of people being there," said John Greenwood, chairman of the Ponte Vista citizens panel. "It's going to overflow. I know both sides are working to get people out."

Few projects have sparked as much debate in San Pedro as Ponte Vista, a Bisno Development proposal to build 1,950 homes at 26900 S. Western Ave., across from Green Hills Memorial Park.

Originally proposed three years ago as a 2,300-home development, Ponte Vista quickly became a lightning rod for residents fed up with increasing density and congestion along Western Avenue.

Thousands of signatures were collected on petitions opposing the development. Over time, opponents launched a movement to hold the line at only single-family homes - about 550 houses would be allowed - on the former 61.5-acre Navy housing property. The developer needs city approval to change the current zoning on the property, which is limited to single-family homes, or R-1.

Los Angeles City Councilwoman Janice Hahn, who represents the area, said last week the case still hasn't been made to her that the R-1 zoning should be changed.

But the project has its supporters, who argue that San Pedro needs more market-rate housing, especially for seniors looking to downsize.

The current Ponte Vista plan calls for 1,100 for-sale town homes and condominium units and 850 for-sale senior condominium units (restricted to buyers 55 and older).

In addition to decreasing the total number of homes and increasing the number of senior-only units, the revised proposal reduces building heights. The previous plan called for four- to five-story buildings; now, the heights are three-to-four stories.

In its final environmental impact report, city planners said the increased traffic along Western can be offset by improvements that the developer has promised to make. Those include traffic signal synchronization and constructing turn-out access lanes for eight of the shopping centers south of the project on Western.

"There are traffic impacts, but they can be mitigated," Tokunaga said.

Critics are not persuaded, however, saying the new housing will add thousands of cars each day to the already busy street.

"We can't dump this many cars onto Western Avenue," said Doug Epperhart of the Coastal San Pedro Neighborhood Council. "It's just not smart."

"The problem on Western is not in front of Ponte Vista," said Ponte Vista land use attorney Allan Abshez. "Traffic going past our door is between 50 and 60 mph. The problem on Western is along the commercial corridor."

Tokunaga said planners will review the testimony and come up with a recommendation to the city's Planning Commission, probably in late October.

"The Planning Commission then either goes along (with the recommendation) or changes it and then they make a recommendation to the City Council," he said.

Many believe the city will ultimately side with a number of units lower than the 1,950 being proposed - but higher than a single-family project.

"Even if there were no opposition it wouldn't be 1,950," Epperhart said. "I don't think it's good planning."

Many residents are standing firm behind the demand for R-1 zoning, he said.

If anything, Epperhart added, public opposition has only hardened over the past several months.

Bisno Development, for now, remains committed to building 1,950 homes.

"We think that 1,950 is a really good density for a number of reasons," Abshez said. "You need a sufficient number of units if you want to have a project with a quality design and quality amenities."

It's an issue that hints to the newest wrinkle added to the Ponte Vista debate: An agreement was signed last week between Bisno Development and Eastview Little League in which the developer promises to provide 6 acres and pay for the entire cost of building new home fields for the 600-member league.

But that will happen only if the city and Bisno come to some kind of an agreement allowing the project - no housing unit number was specified in the Eastview agreement - to go forward.

"There's no 'magic' to 1,950 per se," Abshez said when asked if the developer had a "bottom line" number to keep the development viable. "We want to work with the community on a consensus and a compromise to do a project. We think we've got a good proposal, and we're looking forward to what the public says."

A single-family development, however, is an anachronism in today's housing market, Abshez said.

"I don't think anyone takes very seriously that this property will remain R-1," he said. "There just isn't any R-1 housing being built in California."

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