



L.A. City Council rejects massive Las Lomas development

In a split vote, the panel halts its review of the 5,553-home project near the 5 and 14 freeways. Some council members fear a lawsuit.

By David Zahniser, Los Angeles Times Staff Writer
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A divided Los Angeles City Council voted Wednesday to halt its review of the 5,553-home Las Lomas project, dealing what could well be a fatal blow to the mega-development planned for north Los Angeles County.

"This project would have put 15,000 cars a day in an already heavily impacted area," said City Councilman Greig Smith, who represents the northwest San Fernando

Valley. "The people of L.A. said we can't take that anymore. We're tired of it."

The 10-5 vote, which instructed the Planning Department to stop processing the application, represented a huge victory for Smith, who had argued that the council had no need to review a project that would flood the region with traffic and yet is outside city limits.

The decision also reflected the heightened anxiety over growth and traffic felt by some of the city's elected officials, who almost never issue an outright rejection of a development proposal.

For weeks, Las Lomas Land Co. had been waging an uphill battle to keep the project viable, arguing that Los Angeles should process an environmental impact report and then annex the firm's land from unincorporated Los Angeles County. The company said it had spent \$20 million since 2002 trying to get its project approved.

In many ways, Los Angeles had been the development's last resort.

The site, just north of where the Golden State Freeway intersects the 14, is in territory represented by Los Angeles County Supervisor Mike Antonovich, who opposed the project. Much of it borders Santa Clarita, which also had fought the project.

That left Los Angeles, where Smith introduced a proposal last month to stop all work on the project, partly to avoid wasting the Planning Department's time over the next two years.

Even Las Lomas' defenders on the council said they did not like the proposal, which would have placed a small city on a chaparral-covered hillside. But they argued that the city already had made a promise to review it -- and that stopping would leave Los Angeles vulnerable in court.

"Our city attorney has said that if we fail to move forward, he believes we are in great jeopardy of being sued," said Councilman Richard Alarcon, whose San Fernando Valley district borders the Las Lomas site. Alarcon, along with Councilmen Ed Reyes, Jose Huizar, Herb Wesson and Bernard C. Parks, voted to keep the project alive.

Wednesday's vote delivered the council's most direct

repudiation of a major developer since 2003, when it sued to stop the 3,050-home Ahmanson Ranch development in Ventura County that was ultimately dropped.

Within the city's borders, the council in recent years has approved more than 5,800 homes at Playa Vista, just north of Westchester, and more than 2,500 homes in Hollywood in separate projects on or near Sunset Boulevard, Hollywood Boulevard and Vine Street.

The next major residential project to reach Los Angeles officials will be Ponte Vista, a 1,950-home subdivision planned in San Pedro, which could receive a Planning Commission review by late summer. A 2,900-home development planned for Universal City could receive its first public hearing by the end of the year.

Dan Palmer, president of Las Lomas Land Co., said he has not decided on his next move.

But he voiced disappointment with the council's decision, saying his company had worked hard to make Las Lomas environmentally sound and in keeping with the city's strategy of "smart growth" -- building greater density along transit corridors and filling in gaps in existing urban areas.

"We believe that Las Lomas is a fine project providing many benefits to the community," he said.

Opponents had a dramatically different view, saying Las Lomas represented more urban sprawl, albeit on especially steep terrain.

"A proposal to build a mini-city on the side of a mountain in the middle of a wildlife corridor doesn't begin to meet the definition of smart growth," said Santa Clarita City Council candidate Diane Trautman.

Trautman said she believes the council's decision effectively kills Las Lomas. Still, she said, her city's position on Las Lomas does not necessarily mean that Santa Clarita would oppose other developments planned for the Santa Clarita Valley. That list includes the upcoming Vista Canyon Ranch, which would have up to 1,600 homes.

Santa Clarita played a significant role in the Las Lomas fight, retaining veteran lobbyist Steve Afriat to make its case in Los Angeles. Las Lomas relied on several lobbying firms, including one headed by Fernando Guerra, a Loyola Marymount University professor, and Weston Benschhof, a law firm that has aggressively raised money for council members over the last year.

Weston Benschhof was a co-host of fundraisers last year

for Alarcon, Wesson, Parks, Huizar and Reyes -- all of whom sided with Las Lomas -- as well as council members Janice Hahn, Tom LaBonge and Bill Rosendahl. The firm also held events for City Atty. Rocky Delgadillo's officeholder account and anti-recall effort.

In the weeks leading up to the vote, the City Hall maneuvering over Las Lomas intensified, with Alarcon and Smith each seeking the upper hand.

When Smith wrote his proposal for killing the project, he handed a copy to Alarcon on the council floor. Before Smith had finished gathering signatures for the motion, an Alarcon aide had faxed the motion to alert the Las Lomas Land Co. Alarcon said his aide was wrong in doing so. "It would have been in the public record anyway," he said.

Alarcon's biggest boost came in December, when Delgadillo's office issued a legal opinion stating that the city should continue processing the Las Lomas application, because the Planning Department had been handling the case for years.

That confidential opinion fell into the hands of neighborhood council leaders, who immediately posted it on their website. Alarcon demanded an investigation into the source of the leak.

Smith called for a criminal investigation to determine if Las Lomas had behaved fraudulently when representing itself as the owner of the land. While Smith pointed out that some of the site is owned by a Van Nuys resident, Las Lomas said it had an option to buy the land -- and had behaved properly.

To strengthen his case against the project, Smith hired a onetime lawyer for Los Angeles County who advised the agency that approves annexations. And on Wednesday, Smith tried to sway his colleagues against Las Lomas by pointing out other Delgadillo legal opinions that turned out to be wrong.

Smith reminded Rosendahl that the city attorney's office was wrong in a case involving Lincoln Place, a complex in Venice where hundreds of tenants were evicted.

He also reminded Alarcon that Delgadillo had advised the council not to pursue Proposition R, the 2006 ballot measure that weakened term limits and allowed Alarcon to return to City Hall.

"Mr. Alarcon, you wouldn't be here today if we had listened to the city attorney," Smith said.

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Times staff writer Ann Simmons contributed to this report.