

Panel favors fewer homes in Ponte Vista development

Committee advises against 1,950 units and suggests 535 for the project at former Navy housing site in San Pedro.

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After slapping down a developer's plan to build 1,950 homes on surplus Navy property in San Pedro, a citizens panel Tuesday night voted 8-4 to recommend a low-density residential development that would limit the property to about 535 houses under existing zoning.

From the start, traffic on Western Avenue dominated the yearlong discussions by the panel that never could reach a consensus on how many homes to build on the former military housing site.

"It's been clear in my mind that traffic is the poisoned pill that would doom the original plan as proposed by (developer Bob) Bisno," said panel member Dan Dixon. "Traffic is still the issue."

What happens now is unclear with regard to the Ponte Vista housing plan that was first proposed two years ago by Bisno. City planners are still poring over his original plans for 2,300 homes. But the plan - revised downward last month by Bisno to 1,950 homes - won't have the support of the community or Los Angeles City Councilwoman Janice Hahn if he decides to continue pressing his case to the full City Council.

Bisno, who owns the property, could not be reached for comment following the meeting.

"It was pretty clear that my committee gave a resounding rejection of his proposal," Hahn said after the meeting at the Crowne Plaza Hotel in downtown San Pedro. "I would like to see a project that keeps the (housing) density to R-1. ... I think Bob Bisno could build a very nice R-1 development."

Bisno's revised plan for 1,950 homes was overwhelmingly rejected in a 10-1-1 vote as the committee kicked off its highly anticipated meeting in which final recommendations were expected to be made.

Hahn, who said she'd like to see a plan that includes open park space for recreation along with single-family homes, said she would consult with city planners in coming days to regroup and discuss the next move.

One option is to have the 61.5-acre property across from Green Hills Memorial Park transferred into the San Pedro Community Plan, which currently is undergoing city review.

While some committee members seemed prepared to support a mid-range development in the days leading up to the meeting - something between 850 and 1,200 homes - several of them concluded in the end that there were not the traffic figures or other data to fully endorse a modified plan. There appeared to be no general consensus over even a density range among the 14 panel members.

Some members said they were supporting the R-1 motion for lack of any other viable alternative in between.

"We're saying until we see some reason to change, we're going back to the existing zoning," said panel Chairman John Greenwood. "We do not have consensus on any one plan. We're so far away from that, we're not even close."

"This motion doesn't tell me that I support R-1," said panel member Jerry Gaines. "What it tells me is we don't have a project sitting before us other than the project we've just rejected. ... I do not have a project I can react to in front of me."

Several criticized the developer for not coming forward early in the process with a more acceptable compromise.

"In the absence of a proposed housing project from Bisno Development Company at this time that clearly addresses the (community) concerns (about traffic and density), the CAC recommends that a low-density residential development project which does not exceed the density of the current R-1 zoning is the appropriate land use for the former Navy housing property," the motion stated.

Panel member Al DiRocco voted against the motion, saying the panel was "passing the buck" by not giving city planners any other density number.

"We haven't moved the process along," he said. "We've been asked to do a job and we agreed to do it."

"It doesn't seem we're completing what our assignment was," said panel member Sal Sotomayer, who also expressed concern that many of the traffic improvements Bisno had promised to make would be now lost to the community.

"I think we're losing a lot of benefits if we just go R-1," he said.

There were mixed reactions from the crowd that attended the meeting, many of them wearing yellow "Ponte Vista supporter" stickers while opponents donned "R-1" buttons.

"I'm totally disappointed," said Dorothy Ferrington of San Pedro, who said Bisno's proposed senior housing component is needed for the community.

Ray Gelerman of San Pedro complained that the Ponte Vista Community Advisory Committee, appointed by Hahn last year to study the issue, included too many Rancho Palos Verdes residents.

"I'm offended," he said. "Rancho Palos Verdes is deciding what happens to us. That's wrong."

The project is on the east side of Western Avenue, the dividing line between San Pedro and Rancho Palos Verdes.

Bob Bryant of San Pedro supported the panel's decision, but said he hoped a provision would be made for at least a temporary access road across the property to the new Mary Star of the Sea High School, something Bisno had said he would fund along with his development.

Bryant and others said traffic on Western Avenue, which is already congested, was the key factor.

"It would have clogged up Western Avenue big time," Bryant said. "I would urge Bob Bisno to develop that land with housing for small families."

But for Joan Paulsen, a lifelong San Pedro resident who attended the regular panel meetings over the past 10 months, the decisions made Tuesday were anti-climactic and would likely leave the property vacant for some time to come.

"They should have recommended something, but instead they just re-hashed and re-hashed," she said. "Something's going to be built there, let's get off the dime."

During the two-hour panel discussion, city traffic planners also took a beating, with committee members saying the traffic figures were outdated and unrealistic. Hahn said she would propose a revamping of the way traffic is calculated by city planners in a future motion before the City Council.

"It is, I think, a rejection of the Department of Transportation and it's a message to them to get on the ball," Greenwood said.

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