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Welcome mat doesn't roll out for cohousing

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Sue Pimentel of Orangevale doesn't care if the folks at Sycamore Village feel like trading privacy for proximity.

She doesn't mind the idea of swapping a private lawn for a communal open space, or if all 70 residents feel like eating their dinners together in a giant common house.

In fact, Pimentel thinks it's a great idea. It's just not one she wants in her backyard.

Cohousing, a development concept more common to urban areas, is trying to find a place for itself in a community that prides itself on its rural charm, its open spaces and, above all, its horses.

While conviviality is the foundation on which cohousing is built, advocates for the Sycamore Village, a 35-unit development, are finding their prospective neighbors less welcoming than they'd hoped.

Residents around the 3.5-acre lot just south of the intersection of Greenback Lane and Illinois Avenue are fuming about what this dense development might do to their home prices and the rural feel they've come to expect in Orangevale.

They've gathered about 70 signatures on a petition in opposition to the project.

At a Jan. 2 meeting of the Orangevale Community Planning Advisory Council, a six-person council that reviews proposed developments and makes nonbinding recommendations to the Sacramento County Board of Supervisors, opponents turned out in numbers. The board voted 4-2 to recommend that supervisors deny the project a crucial rezone.

Besides, said Pimentel, one of the petition's organizers who's lived on nearby Thelen Court for the last 23 years, "we already have cohousing (in Orangevale); they're called courts."

Cohousing is a concept that originated in Denmark during the 1970s, said Rick Mockler, vice president of CoHousing Partners LLC and project manager for the Sycamore Village development.

In a cohousing community, residents trade smaller spaces in their private residences for a large common area that features everything from a dining hall to children's rooms and a library, he said.

Not just an advocate for cohousing during the workday, Mockler and his family live in Muir Commons in Davis, America's first newly constructed cohousing development, which opened in 1991.

"What we're trying to do is re-create a traditional neighborhood that existed 50 years ago before TV sets and computer games," he said. "There was a time when people knew their neighbors and celebrated those relationships."

Mockler said there are currently 22 cohousing communities in California, including one in Sacramento and one in Nevada City.

Greg Kelly, who rents in Fair Oaks with his wife, Tiffany, and 4-year-old daughter, Isabelle, saw Sycamore Village as the perfect mix of homeownership without the "disconnected way of life" typical of suburban tracts.

The Kellys are so committed to the project, they've invested \$25,000 of their own money in helping it through design and development. The other five families currently signed onto the project have contributed a total of \$200,000, said Marty Maskall, the project's organizer.

Pimentel said it's not the philosophy of cohousing that upsets her and her neighbors.

"I think it's an excellent idea," she said. "It's environmentally good and hopefully we'll see more of it here and there ... (but) we feel this is an inappropriate place to put it."

Like Pimentel, Katherine Leonard, vice chairwoman of the advisory council, said the project didn't belong in Orangevale.

"There are just way too many changes and rezones I have strong heartburn about rezoning in Orangevale," she said.

Leonard, who has lived in Orangevale all her life, said the "small town living" and the "openness of the land" have kept her in the same spot for more than 50 years.

"You can still walk down the street and see horses and white-rail fences. I can sometimes go out my patio door and smell horses."

Leonard said development is inevitable, but dense development such as Sycamore Village belongs on major thoroughfares such as Greenback Lane and Madison Avenue.

Bob Crawford, chairman of the advisory council, also voted against recommending the rezone.

"People already look at those corridors as nonrural," he said. "You can keep (Orangevale) rural on one side and urban on another."

The Sycamore Village project is awaiting review by county planning staff. From there, it'll go before the Board of Supervisors for a final decision.

Supervisor Roberta MacGlashan, who represents Orangevale, said she hadn't seen details of the project but said she supports keeping sections of Orangevale rural.

"I think parts of the county can continue to be rural into the foreseeable future," she said. "It's a big county and there's room for all types (of development)."

That's not enough for Kelly, who said Tuesday's vote was disappointing.

"If you had some Joe Blow developer (developing the site), he'd chop down every tree and put up massive two-story McMansions," he said. "If that's what the neighbors want, good luck to them."

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