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Vote delayed on Orangevale cohousing plan after neighbors complain

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A controversial housing development slated for Orangevale will have to go back to the drawing board after the Sacramento County Planning Commission refused to recommend it to the Board of Supervisors at a packed meeting Feb. 26.

After a grueling 3 1/2-hour hearing, the commission voted 5-0 to continue the matter until June 24, giving backers of the Sycamore Village Cohousing project 120 days to retool some aspects of their 35-unit project, which has drawn fierce opposition from neighbors.

The hearing room at the Sacramento County Administration Center in downtown Sacramento was packed with more than 100 people.

The project – designed for a parcel at 6041 Illinois Ave. near Greenback Lane – would feature 35 housing units on a 3.5-acre lot. Advocates wanted the commission to recommend approval of rezoning to allow significantly higher density than current zoning. The parcel now is zoned for four units per acre, and proponents want that raised to 10.

Project proponents say that cohousing, a concept that originated in Denmark during the 1970s, is a more ecologically sensible way to live. They say cohousing encourages walking and use of mass transit over the car trips endemic to modern suburban life. In a cohousing community, residents trade smaller spaces in their private residences for a large common area with commonly used features ranging from a dining hall and children's rooms to a library.

In the Sycamore Village project, a typical two-bedroom, two-bathroom townhouse would be between 1,150 and 1,250 square feet, according to the project's Web site. All residents would share a 4,500-square-foot common house.

Prospective residents of the cohousing project, as well as supporters who included Andy Sawyer, chairman of the Sierra Club of California, said their project is the antithesis of the suburban sprawl that has claimed much of Sacramento County. They say the project's impact on the community would be minimal.

Greg Hoyt, an Orangevale resident of 22 years, said he wished he could move into a place like Sycamore Village.

"I live on a cul-de-sac, and nobody knows each other," he said. "I want a sense of community."

Opponents stressed they don't oppose the concept of cohousing, but said the zoning change would result in more traffic, more noise and a destruction of the rural way of life they've come to expect in Orangevale.

"The need for all these changes shows you (the project) doesn't fit," said Patti Samuel, who lives on nearby Timber Court.

James McCleary, another neighbor, agreed.

"Being zoned (four units per acre) established a covenant with county government," he said. Adding the density would be "a huge transgression against the people whose property abuts the project," he said.

Some planning commissioners agreed with that assessment.

"I don't think it's compatible," said Planning Commissioner Bruce Kaspari. "This isn't Europe, this isn't the city of Sacramento, this is Orangevale."

Kaspari was supported by two other commissioners, William Miller and Chairman Kathilynn Carpenter, herself an Orangevale resident. Commissioners Candice Fields and Ryan Chin voiced support for the project, though Chin said he wished the developers and the neighbors could have compromised.

When the project looked doomed to fail, Brian Holloway, a partner in the lobbying firm Holloway Rasmusson and Molodanof of the cohousing project retained as an advocate, suggested the commission take Chin up on his suggestion.

Holloway suggested the project go back to the Orangevale Community Planning Advisory Council, or CPAC, which makes recommendations on planning matters in Orangevale, for approval and allow return later to the county planning commission with a revised project .

That idea didn't sit well with opponents.

"I don't think we can come to a compromise with this plan," said Ron Potts, who heads a local group opposing the project.

His group already offered Sycamore Village project supporters a compromise of zoning the parcel for a mixed five and six units per acre, Potts said, but cohousing advocates did not want to reduce the number of units available.

Potts said the idea of returning Sycamore Village to the CPAC "would be a travesty."

A number of CPAC members wrote letters in support of Sycamore Village even after the advisory council voted in January to deny the project. At Tuesday's meeting, panel member Janet Kerr said she "could say the CPAC is satisfied with the design" before being advised by county counsel that without a proper vote of the body, she could only express her own personal opinion, which was favorable.

Potts said that stance showed the CPAC "doesn't represent us, anyway."