

Project highlights city's divisions - Derry Lane exemplifies discord over growth in Menlo Park

Daily News, The (Palo Alto, CA) (Published as Palo Alto Daily News (CA)) - October 2, 2006

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- Section: Local News
- Readability: 9-12 grade level (Lexile: 1130)

A war of words and accusations is the most fitting way to describe the battle between friends and foes of the Derry Lane Project in Menlo Park.

But the most recent rift, which tops off a host of others, underscores a deeper debate that is fueling the city's political process: How to manage growth.

To make way for the Derry project, the City Council amended the general plan to allow densities of 50 housing units per acre, up from 18 units. The council also passed two zoning changes that mirrored the amendment and raised building height limits to 50 feet from 30. The zoning affects the area between El Camino Real, Glenwood Avenue, the train tracks and Oak Grove Avenue. The project includes 135 condos, 21 at below-market rate, and more than 21,000 square feet of office and retail space.

Aside from complaints about unfettered growth, unchecked density and accusations that the project is a handout to developers, backers of a referendum to halt the development accuse the city of a flawed public process.

"As close as many of us watch things in this town, none of us had any idea they were doing an environmental impact report for Derry or 1300 El Camino (an adjacent lot)," said Don Brawner, a referendum ally. "(The council) knew exactly where the public stood on this issue. High density was not wanted."

So comes the dilemma of who is responsible for informing the public about developments. The city could make an extra effort to send out information. Or residents could pay closer attention by attending meetings or using the city's Web site, which has an e-mail notification system for ongoing projects.

Referendum supporter Martin Engel, who dislikes the project's density, said it feels like being between a rock and a hard place.

"I can complain and say '(The city) should make more of an effort,'" he said. "But it also behooves me - the citizen - to pay attention."

Brawner, Engel and Morris Brown, the referendum's organizer, said they aren't on the Derry e-mail list. Patti Fry, who is also working against Derry, said she couldn't remember if she was getting the e-mails. And the fifth player, Chuck Bernstein, couldn't be reached for comment Saturday.

"I haven't seen the (city's) home page yet," Brawner said. "I don't have time to go through their files. It's a very difficult process."

Three clicks of a mouse will bring residents to a Derry Lane project page on the city's Web site. On it are 14 links to staff reports, EIRs and public hearing announcements. At the bottom, users can submit their e-mail addresses for updates.

"Anytime there is a change to a project, you get an e-mail notifying you of the change with a link to the document," said planning commissioner Louis Deziel. "That's how easy it is to keep up."

Where the city falls short is with meeting minutes. The city is looking at hiring extra help to deal with the months of backlogged minutes overwhelming the City Clerk's office, Vice Mayor Kelly Fergusson said.

Six of the city's seven planning commissioners disagree that the Derry process wasn't public enough. Commissioner Henry Riggs recounted they had three meetings on the project. The seventh commissioner, Melody Pagee, was unavailable for comment.

"It's typical on a major project that there are five to six hearings where the public can fill out a card and introduce facts that we may not know about," Riggs said, referring the review process. "The public comments always affect the commissioners."

Commissioner Lorie Sinott said the city went through a thorough public process and saw limited public input. Her colleague Kirsten Keith said none of the referendum backers was at the meetings.

"So, it's sort of surprising for people to come out of the blue right now and say they don't like the project," she said.

But Fry claims that the city should do more to inform the public, such as citywide mailings, when projects of this scale arise. She said she's also frustrated that the council didn't negotiate a better deal for the density change with the O'Brien Group, the project's developer.

The timing is a sensitive issue for Brown.

"We didn't get into this until the end," he said. "We should have been more up to date."

Brown has hired paid signature gatherers in a last-ditch effort to collect about 1,850 signatures by Oct. 12. If he manages it, the city will have to choose between scrapping the project and putting the it before voters.

More information about the Derry Lane project is available online at www.menlopark.org/projects/comdev_dmu.htm.

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