

Fresno council OKs shorter driveways at Copper River Ranch homes

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Marc Benjamin

The Fresno City Council decided Thursday that Granville Homes should be allowed to build houses with 8-foot driveways in its Copper River Ranch development. The decision overturns the Planning Commission's rejection of the shorter driveways.

Until now, the city has required an 18-foot driveway for these types of homes.

The small-lot houses were sold by Granville Homes under a pilot program, but city officials say they didn't authorize similar projects at Copper River Ranch.

"It was very clear at the time that this was a pilot program to evaluate the impacts," City Manager Bruce Rudd told the Fresno City Council. "We had some concerns then, but we said we will test it out."

Granville Homes wanted to keep building homes with shorter driveways, although the company "clearly knew what we did previously was a pilot program" and that there had been no discussions about the pilot program or changing city driveway policy, Rudd said.

The pilot program was not unusual, he said, because the city has met other developers' requests for testing features such as more rounded curbs, he said.

The council voted 5-1 in favor of shorter driveways at Copper River, but said no more similar projects will be approved in the next 90 days, giving the city time to develop a new driveway policy.

The new Granville Homes project, near Friant Road and Alicante Avenue, consists of 134 homes on 21 acres. Of those homes, 85 will have small lots. Some of the small-lot homes will be designed with 8-foot driveways and others will have 18-foot driveways, said Darius Assemi, Granville Homes president.

Fresno planning commissioners voted against the shortened driveways because the city has no policy to approve them in areas of city-maintained roads. Shorter driveways are allowed on private planned-unit developments where homeowners' associations maintain roads, city officials said.

Two years ago, city officials approved the pilot project in Copper River Ranch's Tresana subdivision consisting of 45 small-lot homes. The development was designed with 8-foot driveways so Granville Homes could learn if there was a market for them and if they were safe.

Among the city's problems with shorter driveways is vehicles parked across sidewalks. "We had assurances that people wouldn't park in the driveway, but they park in the driveway," Rudd said.

Also, city officials are concerned about potential liability for collisions because drivers have less time and space to survey cross traffic, and about the inability of large public trucks -- fire engines or garbage trucks -- to drive down streets where curbs are packed with vehicles.

Shorter driveways take away two parking places, and homeowners who don't use their driveway or garage will park in the street, Rudd said.

The planning commission's rejection was appealed by Council Member Lee Brand, who said Fresno could be at a competitive disadvantage if other cities allow shorter driveways.

"There are builders in Madera, Clovis, Kerman, Sanger, Selma that compete directly with us, so if we don't have a project that sells they are going to simply drive across the bridge to go to Madera, go across Willow to Clovis," he said.

Brand said requiring longer driveways would defeat attempts to improve air quality with higher density subdivisions.

But Council Member Blong Xiong, the only member against the plan, suggested the policy discussion on driveway setbacks be held prior to any votes on the Granville proposal.

"We are ready to make a policy decision change right now and I am not sure I'm ready to do that right now," he said. "We usually start out with the policy workshop, not the policy change."

Granville wants to move forward because the market for small-lot homes was strong, but the city hadn't returned its verdict on safety, Assemi said.

The small-lot properties -- about 3,000 square feet -- have a waiting list, he said.

"It's been very successful and very well received," he said.

Assemi said the company would forgo additional projects with shorter driveways to allow for the policy discussion. The streets, he said, are normal width -- 36 feet -- so emergency vehicles are not affected.

Assemi said the project has been held up since October and the planning commission's rejection delayed it even longer. He said other Fresno city projects were approved with shorter driveways and that there were no complaints about residents misusing shorter driveways in Tresana.

The reporter can be reached at (559) 441-6166, mbenjamin@fresnobee.com or [@beebenjamin](https://twitter.com/beebenjamin) on Twitter.