

Assemi's Westlake project in Fresno's frontier on hold

By BoNhia
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Developer Darius Assemi of Granville Homes stands on his Mission Ranch property west of Highway 99 on Wednesday, Oct. 23, 2013 in Fresno, Calif. As with Mission Ranch, Assemi has decided to put development plans on hold on his Westlake project west of Highway 99 and plant almond trees instead. The site is bounded by Gettysburg, Garfield, Shields and Grantland avenues. Granville eventually intends to build houses, apartments, stores and a 25-acre lake at Westlake, which is expected to have 8,000 residents — the size of Firebaugh.

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A master-planned Fresno community with a private lake billed to be a “destination” in an otherwise arid and sporadically developed area west of Highway 99 is on hold for what could be another decade.

Developer Darius Assemi, president of Granville Homes, said the timing isn't right for his Westlake development, which lies beyond Fresno's city limits. The cost to build is too high and he's waiting to see the city of Fresno's growth plan for the area before moving ahead with the project.

In the meantime, Assemi will plant almond trees on the land.

The decision, made in recent weeks, is disappointing, said Assemi, who in 2004 began assembling more than 400 acres to create Westlake. “We've been working on this project for 10 years,” Assemi said. “We want to make sure it's financially feasible and the right components are in place.”

The project would be the first major development in an area that has long been in the city's sphere of influence or legally recognized as being in the city's growth path.

But Westlake has slowly made its way through the planning and approval process, occasionally raising public concerns about sprawl, its effect on the environment, public safety and city budget issues.

“The major growth that the general plan calls for is west of 99 in the next quarter of a century,” said Council Member Oliver Baines. “Clearly, we and the city see that’s where growth will go. I think the investment (sector) sees that as well ... southwest and northwest of 99 is going to be where you see the most interest in the next few years.”

Rumors of a delay in the huge residential and commercial project have swirled through City Hall. The news wasn’t a surprise to the council members whose districts lie west of Highway 99 and could benefit from any development there.

Baines, whose district includes an area south of the development, said Assemi “wants to be one of the pioneers that really spurs growth west of 99. I think maybe this particular project didn’t go quite as planned.”

Baines knows about Assemi developments: His council district is home to Assemi’s Mission Ranch property, which also has almond trees instead of houses.

Still, Baines remained upbeat about the future of the west side.

Delaying Westlake “doesn’t completely hinder development west of 99,” Baines said. “Overall, interest and growth and development is still very possible.”

Outgoing Council Member Blong Xiong, who is running for Fresno County Supervisor Phil Larson’s seat, declined to comment.

Larson, who has served three terms on the county board, said the setback will slow development on the west side of the highway.

“That’s an area in the (city’s) sphere of influence for over 30 years and Fresno hasn’t done anything with it yet,” Larson said. “This is not going to help matters.”

Increased cooperation between the city and developers or investors and a better housing market would help the project get off the ground, Larson said.

High-profile master-planned communities dot the northern Fresno and Clovis landscape. Another handful planned for Rio Mesa — Madera County’s growth area — is creating a stir.

Westlake, Assemi said, was an answer to talks with city leaders a decade ago about where the next master-planned community should go. “They said we need you to go west,” he said.

Assemi pulled together land that forms a long rectangular property bounded by Gettysburg, Garfield, Shields and Grantland avenues. Plans are to build about 2,600 single-family homes and apartments. The development could become home to as many as 8,000 people.

There will be a 55-acre lake, nearly three miles of trails, an elementary school (in the Central Unified School District) and 300,000 square feet of commercial space.

The project’s environmental impact report was approved by the city at the end of last year, but the property still needs to be annexed into the city. Then it would be a matter of submitting more detailed maps before construction could start, Assemi said.

The development took a turn not long after Assemi spoke about the making of Westlake during a lunch-hour event held at the Gazarian Real Estate Center at Fresno State in September.

The company took a closer look at the project’s price tag and found that “Westlake costs substantially more to

develop than anticipated — 30% more roughly,” Assemi said.

A lot of the infrastructure is already in place such as sewer trunk lines and a sewer facility. But a 430-acre project — a little bigger than the size of Harlan Ranch in northeast Clovis — has high mitigation costs and fees such as fixing roadways like Ashlan and Shaw avenues. And the lake has to be created from scratch.

“We’re putting a lake in, taking land out and building a lake,” Assemi said. “We’re building a five-star project in a part of town that is not quite five-star today.”

But the area has the potential to become “the next Woodward Park,” he said.

Assemi wants to see a master plan of development standards or a map from the city showing, for example, where trails would go, where parks would be and how one end would connect to the other. That means waiting for Veteran’s Boulevard to be completed and for the Central Unified School District to build a new high school.

Once the pieces come together, Assemi hopes the real estate market will also have recovered from the dismal housing downturn. Assemi said he believes the market is only halfway through the recovery.

“We need to develop Westlake at the beginning of an economic recovery cycle,” Assemi said. “Once we break ground it takes two years to get it off the ground. We want to be at the beginning of the next cycle and have product ready to go. We believe we have missed the boat on this cycle by at least two years.”

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