

Clovis City Council rejects planned assisted living facility

By Marc Benjamin

Residents in northwest Clovis crowded City Council chambers Monday night to stop a proposed 98-unit assisted living facility on West Nees Avenue near Buchanan Education Center.

The residents said the 3.57-acre project would add to traffic and safety problems, cause lighting and glare issues, crowd the neighborhood, and pack too much onto a small property.

In the end, council members agreed, voting 4-0 to reject the project.

City Council Member Lynne Ashbeck said the project was “too intense for the space.”

She said the area along Nees Avenue between Willow and Peach avenues has numerous uses: a city trail, commercial space, homes, a private school and Buchanan Education Center east of Peach Avenue.

“Nees is clunky,” she said. “It’s not our definition of orderly transition,” she said.

Neighbors said the original zoning for the property was for single-family homes, which they wouldn’t oppose. The proposed facility would have 80 units for assisted living patients and another 18 units for housing up to 28 “memory care” patients. It was proposed near a private school and south of the residential neighborhood.

Resident Dave Ewing said the density of the project would be “900% higher than the existing neighborhood.”

The lot, he said, is too small for a project of such magnitude: “It’s a bad fit for the location. Please help keep the single-family character of the neighborhood.”

Jake Gallinetti, a resident in the Buchanan Estates neighborhood, said residents were told there would be 10 homes on the property. “Many of us would not have bought our houses had we known this project was going to go in instead of the 10 lots,” he said.

Lawyer Sarah Hedgpeth Harris said the city must prepare an environmental impact report and that the environmental documents prepared for the project were not sufficient.

She said noise will increase beyond the baseline of the vacant lot it is today and traffic also will increase far beyond what it is today.

David Wolfe, Clovis city attorney, said the city undertook an environmental report even though it was not required. He said the property is less than 5 acres in size and environmental studies are not necessary because properties of such size are under an exemption in California environmental law.

Clovis Planning Director Dwight Kroll said the city has approved 10 similar assisted living facilities of similar size. The approved sites have resulted in no complaints from the surrounding neighborhoods.

In addition, Kroll said, the city must provide housing for all segments of the population, including the elderly, many of whom will be served by an assisted-living facility. The city’s housing element requires the city to have more dense housing, and an assisted-living facility provides those housing opportunities.

The project, proposed by O’Brien Development, was billed as a “quality of life” project for seniors by Dirk Poeschel, who represented the developer.

He said the project would not have significant environmental issues as nearby residents were suggesting.

But Council Member Harry Armstrong said, "I see problems down the road."

Yet he also warned residents that the state's efforts in increasing densities for housing could lead to another project with intense zoning on the site.

"Be careful what you ask for," he said. "We could do something much more intensive."

- In other action, the council approved an electronic car charging station at the parking lot next to the downtown water tower near Hughes Avenue and Fifth Street.

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