

Growing pains

Proposed Cal Park hotel project has neighborhood seniors feeling boxed in

Just ahead of Thanksgiving, residents in the Sierra Sunrise subdivision of California Park received a city notice that turned their stomachs. The following Tuesday, Dec. 3, the owner of the property abutting theirs, at Bruce Road and Highway 32, unveiled plans for a four-story, 112-room hotel.

Though the lot had sold that summer, “no one had any inkling whatsoever that this [project] was even being proposed,” said Sandy Goulart, who lives in one of Sierra Sunrise’s senior housing communities.

She and her neighbors grew concerned. They vividly remembered getting evacuation warnings during the Camp Fire, only to find themselves hemmed in by gridlock. (“Sitting ducks” is how resident Kathleen Lambkin described the feeling.) The hotel would use their private street, Sierra Sunrise Terrace, for entry off Bruce.

Since the parcel is zoned community commercial, a hotel there requires a use permit—a determination made by the Chico Planning Commission, subject to appeal to the City Council. The process includes a public meeting to inform neighbors. Lambkin, president of one of Sierra Sunrise’s three homeowners associations, noted that the timing and location on site meant it would be dark, “freezing cold” and “a lot of people would be out of town.” Besides, not everyone got the notice, dated Nov. 21, before the holiday.

Her husband, Jeff, put word on the website Nextdoor.com—“it went viral,” Goulart said. Moved indoors, the meeting drew a capacity crowd.

The applicant—Continuum Hospitality, LLC, of Bakersfield—will hold a second meeting March 2 at 6:30 p.m. at the Canyon Oaks Country Club. Filings from the California Secretary of State’s Office show Continuum became a corporation last June, the same month the Butte County Assessor’s Office recorded it buying the parcel from Fifth Sun, the apparel company owned by Meriam Park developer Dan Gonzales.

NorthStar Designing Solutions, a Chico engineering firm, represents Continuum, a Marriott franchisee, with its application. At present, the city Planning Services Division awaits resubmission of NorthStar/Continuum’s requests for a use permit and architectural review.

“We don’t know what their next submittal could consist of,” said Shannon Costa, the city of Chico associate planner reviewing the application. “They could change it. They could not resubmit it. There’s lots of things that could happen.”

Residents argue that the corner is not suited for a hotel. They cite traffic issues as their primary concern, compounded by the fact that hotel guests would have to drive for restaurants and shopping.



“There are no supportive services for a hotel,” Lambkin said, “and there are supposed to be supportive services for us.”

Southeast Chico, where this site sits, is a hub of development. Due north along Bruce, just past California Park Drive, the 104-unit Skyline Apartments complex speeds toward completion. Along Bruce and 32, adjacent to the Humboldt Road Burn Dump, is the first phase of the Oak Valley subdivision. Meriam Park is taking shape at Bruce and East 20th Street, across from where the Stonegate subdivision—which extends to Skyway—awaits the outcome of environmental litigation (see “Stonegate challenged,” Newslines, Jan. 3, 2019). Uphill from Stonegate, Valley’s Edge is under environmental review.

“What stands out about development on that side of town is it’s new—it’s going to change the scenery, the familiar viewshed that people in that area have had,” Costa said. “What is important to point out is that the city is very constrained in where and how it can develop. ...

“These are some of the only lands left to be developed,” she added, “because we only have so much more room left to grow. There are only so many infill sites left in the city, [and] we do have environmental constraints in a lot of our areas.”

Chico’s general plan considers Bruce a “ring road” that, connected to others, “wraps around the entire city,” Costa explained. The development surge prompted city and state officials to seek \$10 million in transportation grant funding to widen the roadway from two lanes to four; that proposal is pending.

Plans call for a four-story Marriott at Bruce Road (right) and Highway 32.

PHOTO BY EVAN TUCHINSKY

Since the hotel plans are “incomplete,” Costa said she could not say much about them. Regarding traffic, she said Sierra Sunrise Terrace is a “collector street” in the general plan, funneling traffic to Bruce, and that she consulted the Chico Fire Department on evacuation routes.

“Being a Paradise resident, I can’t help but sympathize with what [Sierra Sunrise residents] went through on Nov. 8,” she said. “It was a traumatic experience for them. But I think our fire department has a pretty good grasp on handling that issue with them.”

Residents remain wary. The state Auditor’s Office released a report in December that found Butte County among those “not adequately prepared to protect its most vulnerable residents from natural disasters” (available at auditor.ca.gov). Sierra Sunrise residents cite that report in letters to the city opposing the project.

“What complicates it is this being the largest senior community in Chico,” Jeff Lambkin said. Sierra Sunrise Terrace, a street less than a half-mile long, links 626 residences. “When you’re thinking of evacuation, you’re normally thinking able-bodied people. A lot of people in this community, elderly people, are on walkers or in wheelchairs in the various residential [facilities].”

His wife added: “There are plenty of lots all over Chico that are appropriate for a hotel. This just is not.”

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