

The Foothills Sun-Gazette

Woodlake building for the future

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By Reggie Ellis

Woodlake – Tulare County's smallest city has already taken some big steps to accommodate a growing population with new homes this year.

At its March 28 meeting, the Woodlake City Council voted on two subdivisions that will bring much needed new and affordable housing into the town. The first subdivision, Greenwood, was proposing to build 124 single family homes, a park and ponding basin with off-street access to the neighborhood and a commercial lot with highway frontage on 31 acres along Naranjo Boulevard and Ropes Avenue in the southwest part of town.

City Planner Greg Collins said the subdivision would be unique because of several specific design elements that will be required of the developer. Some of the conditions included narrower streets to slow traffic, tree-lined streets to provide shade, and decorative street lights on every street. Collins said every home will have the garage set back 10 feet from the front of the house and a five-foot front porch.

"We want to emphasize the front of the house and de-emphasize the garage," Collins said. "We are trying to set the bar high in terms of a nice, designed project."

Collins said the subdivision would be built in four phases. The first phase would include 48 lots in the northeast quarter of the site while Phase 2 will build 31 lots on the southern half as well as the 2 acre ponding basin and surrounding park. Phase three will complete the final 40 lots while the final phase will include development of 2 acres of neighborhood commercial property along Naranjo Boulevard (Highway 216).

The subdivision will also include a park and ponding basin will be surrounded by a decorative wrought iron fence and homes along the outskirts of the subdivision will have a six-foot block wall.

Collins said the project would require the annexation of 15.4 acres of land currently outside the city limits. That annexation could also trigger the annexation of additional 19 acres on five parcels. Collins said the five property owners have been notified of the city's intention to annex their property and they all had an interest in having their parcels annexed at the same time. The Council voted 3-1 to initiate the annexation, amend the General Plan, and amend the zoning of the property and to approve the subdivision map. Gregorio Gonzalez was absent and the lone dissenting vote was cast by Frances Ortiz, who was concerned about five rural property owners being annexed into the city as part of the project.

This is the City's second approval of a subdivision this year. On Jan. 11, the City Council approved the Final Subdivision Map for the Valencia Heights. Self-Help Enterprises will develop 70 homes on 15 acres on the southeast corner of Valencia and Wutchumna. The subdivision will also include a half-acre pocket park/storm drainage retention pond; and a pedestrian access way. On March 28, the Council approved a subdivision agreement with Self-Help on a 4-0 vote.

Even before the proposed property was rezoned last summer, City Administrator Ramon Lara reported more than 80 applicants had applied for the project thanks, in part, to the first-time homebuyers program provided by the City of Woodlake. Self-Help Enterprises administers the program using the City's combination of Community Development Block Grants (CDBG) and CalHome grants to subsidize mortgages for new homeowners.

Home buyers also have the opportunity to help construct their home. The hours the homeowners work during construction is attributed to the amount they will pay on the overall mortgage of the home.

With all of the interest in the new homes, Mayor Rudy Mendoza said he would be offering a first-time homebuyer seminar from 6-8 p.m. at the Woodlake Memorial Building on Saturday, April 12. Mendoza said members of the Tulare County Realtors Association will be on hand to answer questions from the public.

The new homes will mean more customers for Woodlake's emerging business district, which now includes a Rite Aid and Subway. Those stores will further generate new tax revenue that will help the City continue to transform its downtown through public projects. Currently the City is in the final stages of its roundabout, is preparing to begin its Plaza and new community center project, and completed its downtown streetscape and Woodlake Museum projects last year.