

CALAVERAS PLANNERS PASS ON HOME LOTS DECISION

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SAN ANDREAS - The Calaveras County Planning Commission decided Thursday not to decide whether it would be wise to allow more home lots in Forest Meadows, an upscale Murphys subdivision that is prone to major wildfires but has only one public road in and out to nearby Highway 4.

Instead, they punted the job to the Calaveras County Board of Supervisors. In part, that's because the supervisors over the years have given contradictory instructions - both asking planners to comply with state laws requiring two public road exits for housing subdivisions but also, in 2002, ruling that the benefits of building more homes outweighed impacts, including safety concerns for 313 home lots in earlier phases of Forest Meadows.

"We feel this is a board policy decision," said Planning Commission Chairwoman Suzanne Kuehl.

Developer Lou Papais wants to map the subdivision's last 134 lots, just a fraction of the more than 1,000 already in the golf course development.

Forest Meadows was first approved in 1970. Since then, residents have twice been evacuated during wildfires, including the Old Gulch Fire in August 1992.

Papais said he's tried to find routes for a second public street but has failed because the steep terrain, unwilling property owners or hostile neighbors.

Still, Papais said that if his project is approved, he could at least provide paved emergency exits - which would be behind locked gates. Firefighters would have keys to those gates, enabling them to get into the subdivision in an emergency.

Ebbetts Pass Fire District Chief David Baugher said he supports Papais' proposal because having paved emergency routes behind locked gates is better than the unmaintained emergency trails available now.

"That would give us two lanes of egress out of the project," Baugher said.

Still, emergency exits behind locked gates don't satisfy either state law or local codes requiring access to subdivisions, said Robert Pachinger of the county's Public Works Department.

Commissioner Fawn McLaughlin said concerns over road access and safety were enough to prompt her to vote in favor of the staff's recommendation that the commission deny the subdivisions.

McLaughlin, however, failed to get a second when she made that motion. The commission is hobbled right now because it only has three members rather than the full five. Two members - Bill Mason and Lyle Wallace - are no longer eligible because the county's recent redistricting put them outside the boundaries of their assigned districts.

That means that all three current members have to agree to pass any measure. After McLaughlin's motion failed, she, Kuehl and Commissioner Ted Allured voted unanimously to send the matter to supervisors to resolve the question of whether the county should encourage more people to live in a subdivision with only one street exit.

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