

Madera County OKs 8,200 homes

Board of Supervisors approves 2 developments in the Rio Mesa area.

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By Chris Collins / The Fresno Bee

Despite concerns about potential negative environmental effects, increased traffic congestion and inadequate school funding, the Madera County Board of Supervisors on Monday approved two large developments in southeast Madera County's Rio Mesa area.

Supervisors unanimously OK'd a 3,000-home development that will border the northwest portion of Millerton Lake and also voted 5-0 in favor of a 5,200-home urban center that would be mostly east of Highway 41 and south of Avenue 15.

The approval of the two developments marks a step toward completing a long-planned community in the area that eventually will be home to 100,000 people.

A number of other potential developments in the area are seeking approval.

The Millerton Lake project, which will cover more than 2,100 acres of land, was approved after receiving an endorsement from the Chawanakee Unified School District, which negotiated a last-minute deal with developers that will ensure that \$60 million from the project will be committed to building future schools.

But the district was vehemently opposed to the second development, called the Tesoro Viejo project, which will cover 1,600 acres and eventually be home to 13,000 people.

School district consultant Marshall Krupp said the district will need \$170 million to build future schools in that community, but will be \$100 million short after state funds and developer fees.

The tab will be picked up by current and future residents of the entire school district, he said

"In essence, this developer is burdening this project on the backs of others," Krupp said.

But developer Bob McCaffrey said his project would not shortchange the district.

"Above all, we are committed to higher-quality, well-funded schools," he said.

Krupp said that the school district will meet as early as next week and could decide to sue the county in order to ensure adequate school funding.

Also, a representative from the Fresno County Department of Public Works and Planning warned that the developments would increase traffic in northeast Fresno County and not provide the money needed to make road improvements.

"Until those issues are resolved, it's premature to certify [the project]," said Lynn Gorman, the department's deputy director.

Nevertheless, the Board of Supervisors said that even though the developments may not be perfect, delays would only harm them.

"The developer has really bent over backwards to make this happen," Supervisor Vern Moss said of the Millerton Lake development. "I think it's a great project. It has so much going for it."

Jad Dennis, a planner with Friant Development, which will build the Millerton Lake project, said he doesn't know when his team will break ground because the sour economy has put everything on hold.

"We won't build until there's a market," he said.

John Sanger, an attorney working on the Tesoro Viejo project, said it would be at least two to four years before developers can start building houses there.

Dennis said the Millerton Lake project is environmentally sound. He dismissed concerns about traffic congestion, saying, "Fresno and Madera counties are neighbors, they share traffic and have to work it out."

Dave Koehler, executive director of the San Joaquin River Parkway and Conservation Trust, a nonprofit seeking to preserve and restore the river, said the Millerton Lake project will leave "very key habitat issues outstanding."

Coke Hallowell, who lives on a ranch near the lake, told supervisors that the area is "covered with sensitive species" and urged them to more carefully consider their decision.

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