

South Park project divides public Teton Meadows doubles amount of traditional affordable housing.

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Valley residents Monday blasted and applauded a South Park development proposal that now offers 250 units of traditional, deed-restricted affordable housing.

A five-hour planning commission hearing on the Teton Meadows subdivision proposal drew more than 100 people, filling the seats in county chambers so that people lined the walls, sat on the floor and spilled into the hallway. During the meeting, Teton Meadows developers revealed they'll make 250 of their proposed 500 homes affordable units and said they don't know what they'll charge for the remaining 250 units.

The change did not appease critics, who spoke about a host of issues, including the timing of the Jackson/Teton County Comprehensive Plan rewrite, density, traffic, location and environmental impacts. Supporters urged the planning commission to endorse the project, citing a dire need for work-force housing.

The meeting was extended for two hours, until 11 p.m., to allow for public comment. Minutes before 11 p.m., with at least four more people waiting to speak, the commission continued the hearing to 5:30 p.m. Wednesday, during which the board will again listen to critics and supporters.

Teton Meadows Ranch, a partnership between James Reinert's Sequoia Development and the Jackson Hole Community Housing Trust, seeks to build 500 homes on 288 acres situated between Rafter J and Melody Ranch using a zoning that lets developers build dense projects if 50 percent of the project is deed-restricted affordable housing. The 250 deed-restricted homes would be for people making between 80 percent and 175 percent of area median income (\$47,700 to \$104,344 for a couple).

One hundred-fifty homes would be "gap" housing, a deed-restricted product aimed at people making more than 175 percent of the area median income (\$104,344 for a couple) but less than what's required to buy into the free market. One hundred homes would be sold on the free market to subsidize the project.

Originally, developers planned only 125 affordable homes and 275 gap units, but they said Monday they'll change that mix upon request from the Teton County Housing Authority and county planners. The county wants Teton Meadows to build 50 homes in five affordable housing categories.

Another big change came when the Teton Meadows team said it doesn't know what it will charge for gap housing. While team members had been quoting prices of \$440,000 to \$740,000, they said with the change in housing types, they don't know anymore. In previous proposals, those homes could appreciate at only fixed rates.

Reinert told the commission he's been working on the project for almost two years. He fears Jackson Hole is about to "lose its soul" and that his opponents want to drive away "the very thing that drew them here."

Reinert said his project would house a cross section of community members and prevent Jackson from becoming an enclave for the uber wealthy such as Aspen or Vail, Colo.

He said he envisions a diverse, vibrant community where he can raise his three small children.

"If we don't stop the mass exodus of our work force, we will be left with housing for the ultra wealthy and for those who qualify for affordable housing and with nothing in between," he said.

While Reinert described his vision as improving the valley, critics said it will only lead to South Park's degradation.

"None of us should be here tonight," said Becky Woods, a local writer who lives in Melody Ranch. "I'm angry I had to show up."

Woods said Reinert's plan fails to comply with county development regulations and should not have moved forward to a hearing until it did. She called the planning staff, which is recommending approval of the application, biased toward Teton Meadows.

Woods said it would be unfair to make South Park neighborhoods, which have 45 percent of the county's 364 affordable homes, shoulder most of the program. That would characterize the area as the "low-rent district" of the valley, she said.

"Why should the vast majority of density impacts be born by one segment of the population for a county-wide

problem?" she said.

With a plan to phase in the 500 homes during five years, Teton Meadows would flood the real estate market and decrease surrounding property values, she said.

Yet David Viehman, the owner of Jackson Hole Real Estate and Appraisal who publishes quarterly market analyses, said at the hearing that affordable housing has never decreased free-market home values. That is a myth, he said.

Home values in Melody Ranch have increased 100 percent during the last five years. Values in Cottonwood Park, which is close to affordable apartments, also have increased 100 percent. East Jackson Homes across the street from an affordable project are selling for \$1.5 million, he said.

Too isolated, some say

Still, South Park residents called the new 500 homes too dense and in the wrong location.

Charlene Zuckerman, a resident of South Park Ranches since 1981, said the location is wrong. Teton Meadows would isolate a large group in an area without enough support resources such as retail, medical services and schools. Residents would have to drive 12 miles round trip for those services.

According to planners, the number of homes per acre is similar to other neighborhoods in the area, with 1.7 units per acre in Teton Meadows and 1.5 and 1.3 in Rafter J and Melody Ranch, respectively. They also said setbacks from property lines are greater than those in surrounding neighborhoods.

"I just can't believe we're considering this," said Kristin Vito, a real estate agent. "That's so dense. This is a gorgeous piece of land."

Melody Ranch resident Rich Bloom said density calculations are wrong because open space in his neighborhood was not included and portions of Rafter J with commercial areas also were excluded.

Bloom has been one of the most vocal opponents of Teton Meadows. He told the crowd Monday that his involvement has been so divisive that his former employer asked that he not use its name.

Bloom said he and his wife spent 25 years working their way into a single-family home in Melody. First, they built a home in Driggs and commuted. Then they lived in a condo on Highway 22 for 14 years before moving south of town.

"We're your working-class people," he said.

Priscilla Marden, a 35-year valley resident, said she worked hard to get to where she is today, living in a home in Melody Ranch on a \$24,000 annual salary.

"Any of us who've lived here this long have worked really hard," she said. "Most of us who've been here this long have not been subsidized."

The county is focused only on those who qualify for affordable housing, and that drives most development decisions, she said.

John Vallieres, an employee of The Jackson State Bank & Trust and resident of Blair apartments in Jackson, called comments like Marden's "typical NIMBYism." Then he apologized for offending anyone.

"I have seen proposals for affordable housing go before the commissioners only to be rejected," he said. "Yet everyone agrees affordable housing is something that we do need to remain a viable community."

Teton Meadows could make a significant impact on the worker housing shortage, he said. Affordable housing representatives estimated the county has a shortfall of 600 to 900 units.

Chris Johnston, chairman of the Teton County School District board of education, and Pam Shea, superintendent of schools, did not endorse Teton Meadows. They did say the district is facing a growing housing crisis, with 30 school staff on the waiting list for an affordable unit.

Eighty percent of district employees who have been here more than 15 years own a free-market home, while only 63 percent who have been here more than four years own a market home. What's alarming, Shea said, is that only 32 percent of employees who have between one and three years tenure own a free-market home. Seventy people live outside the valley.

Meanwhile, Shea said, the district has seen people moving into affordable homes.

Snowstorm taught a lesson

Because so many employees could not get to work during last week's snowstorms, Shea said she served as principal, secretary and facility manager.

Virgil Boss, assistant administrator of support services for St. John's Medical Center, said the hospital also struggled during last week's storms. Of 400 full-time employees, 125 live outside the valley. St. John's had to use two-bedroom suites at the Hitching Post so employees could stay the night. Others worked double shifts, he said.

Further, the No. 2 reason workers leave jobs at St. John's is because of the cost of buying a home. Three physicians recently turned down offers to work here because of housing costs, he said.

Jerry Blann, Jackson Hole Mountain Resort president, said the county missed an opportunity 10 years ago to build 300 employee units at the Stilson lot. Whenever Blann drives by that property, he thinks "what a loss," he said.

While Teton Meadows may not be the perfect project in the perfect location, it could address a majority of the housing need, Blann said.

Scott Horn, chief administrative officer with the mountain resort, said housing always comes up as a major issue among employees. Two top employees left this year because of home prices, he said.

"This valley needs to start to solve it," Horn said of the work-force housing problem.

Lindsay Gilstrap, who lives in an apartment in The Aspens, said she and her husband want to buy a home and start a family; however, making just a bit more than \$71,550, together, they don't qualify.

Even with such arguments, critics said the county should wait until its comprehensive plan is revised before making a decision on Teton Meadows. That plan likely will determine how to address the housing shortfall.

"Planning should guide development," said Andrew Salter. "Development should not guide planning."

Rafter J resident Sharon Mader called Teton Meadows efforts "a shameless try to slip beneath the wire" while the comprehensive plan process is underway.

To approve the development before the plan is done would be a "travesty" and would make a "mockery" of the planning system, she said.

Others stressed that this application is only for sketch plan, meaning that many high-level, concrete elements would be determined at final development plan.

"It's a more philosophical, 10,000-foot-view," said Jeff Daugherty, county planning director.

Others said those answers, such as traffic impacts, should inform the discussion now,

Bob Hammond, a Melody Ranch homeowner and employee of the Wyoming Department of Transportation, said South Park Loop Roads is starting to "fall apart," and with winter conditions, the tight road can be scary.

Hammond said he didn't feel that the traffic analysis in the Teton Meadows proposal is correct.

That study found that South Park Loops intersection with Highway 89 needs a traffic signal even without Teton Meadows. With a signal and new turn lanes, traffic will operate at a high level of service once Teton Meadows 500 homes are constructed, it found.

Hammond said he knows of no plans WYDOT has for a traffic light.

Dave Kaufman, also with WYDOT, said he thinks traffic projections are too low, particularly if a new school is constructed.

Commissioners questioned Teton Meadows about having only one entry off South Park Loop, particularly in the event of an emergency. Planning commissioners asked if Teton Meadows had looked at purchasing a road easement through the Big Trails neighborhood to construct another access road, but developers said no. Commissioners also peppered

Teton Meadows with questions about connecting to Rafter J or Melody Ranch. The developers said the neighbors don't want to.

At least one neighbor told tales of wildlife in the area. Developers and planners have said the project would have little impact on the environment because it's now disturbed agricultural meadows with no migration corridors.

Yet Cindy Stone, a resident of Big Trails, described seeing elk, deer, moose, coyotes and various birds on her property. A bald eagle often perches in a tree outside her home, she said.

"They can't adapt to high-density housing," she said. "My eagle isn't going to know the difference between chiselers and Chihuahuas."