

Condo Development Foes, Builder Ready to Do Battle

'Friends of Pierce College Farm' Protest Plan; Contractor Says More Housing Needed in Valley

By **MARK STEIN**
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After months of preparing for battle, both sides in the controversy over a proposed condominium development next to Pierce College are ready for a string of public hearings and committee meetings that almost certainly will end with a vote by the City Council.

Opponents of the proposed 278-unit complex—scheduled to be built next to the school's farm and nature center in Woodland Hills—have formed a large and effective grassroots organization under the banner "Friends of the Pierce College Farm."

They also have picked up the ardent support of Councilwoman Joy Picus, whose full value to the movement will become known if the fight over the project reaches the council.

The movement's strength was evident earlier this month, when volunteers gathered more than 16,000 signatures on a petition denouncing the project and then turned out 150 strong at a meeting of the city En-

vironmental Quality Board.

However, the developer behind the project, Mayer Group Inc. of Downey has on its side the argument that the Valley needs new construction to help ease the area's worsening **housing shortage**.

The proposed development covers 29 acres of what is now unused agricultural land just east of De Soto Avenue near Oxnard Street. East of the site, with only a chain link fence separating the two, is the college's farm pastures and nature center. To the west is Warner Center.

In addition to the 278 units, the development will include 12 single-family houses. As proposed, 835 people would live on the land.

Standing between the developer and its project is the land's zoning, which is presently RA-1, for low-density residential estates. Mayer Group is seeking a change to

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Developer, Opponents Ready for Battle Over Plan for Condos Near Pierce College

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(Q)RD2-1 zoning, which will allow more units and people (835 as opposed to 195 under the current zoning).

The people who would buy the proposed condominiums—and their possible reactions to living next to the farm, with its sights, smells and flies—are the crux of the controversy.

Opponents of the condos contend that residents would eventually tire of the odors and flies and would press the city and the college district to close or move the college's farm operation. They also fear the danger that the farm's livestock and machinery might pose to children living in the condominiums, and the potential vandalism problems that those children might pose in return.

Proponents of the project dismiss those problems as ones that can be overcome with landscaping, grading and an "owner awareness package" that would warn buyers of the farm's proximity and attendant potential problems and prevent them from seeking to have the farm shut down.

Pierce's farm is the only agricultural program left at any post-secondary school within the city limits.

A spokesman for Friends of the Pierce College Farm said that current zoning allows for the wisest use of the land, short of leaving it vacant.

"The land is currently zoned RA," said Bill Mautner, who lives near the college. "That's what we'd like to keep. The people who would buy that kind of house would be or-

'What we're concerned about is a high-density development on the site.'

intended to animals to begin with. And they would have enough land to keep their own animals, so there could be a little buffer between very rural and very urban land."

Pierce College President Herbert Ravetch agreed, saying that the houses allowed under RA zoning would be "in tune" with the farm.

"I don't think we (community college district administrators) are opposed to all building on that site," he said. "What we're concerned about is building a high-density development . . . that, after careful consideration, does not appear compatible with neighboring usage."

Mayer Group executives contend that ranch-type houses, built on half-acre lots, would be prohibitively expensive and would further reduce the project's effect on the local housing shortage. The condos are projected to cost about \$200,000 each; Mayer Group senior vice president Kenneth W. Agid claims that ranch-type houses would probably cost more than 3½ times that amount.

An employee in the city Planning Department, who did not want to be identified, said that he doubted the ranch house plan was workable because for whatever the houses were priced at—\$750,000, as Agid says, or \$500,000 as his opponents say—buyers would expect a much better site than the area next to the farm. Sandwiching such expensive homes between a commercial area and a farm, and near a major street (De Soto Avenue) and a flood control channel would make them difficult to sell, even in today's market, Agid said.

Agid also disputed the contention that condo owners would someday clamor for the end of the college's farm operation.

"It's obvious that the farm is there, and we plan on fully explaining what some of the problems might be," he said. "We don't want dissident tenants. We'd rather have people overaware of potential problems instead of trying to sneak

them in and have to tell them, 'Don't look out your back window.'"

Opponents are dissatisfied with that position.

"We feel that no matter what they do to mitigate the effects, sometime the question will stop being 'How do the condos impact the college?' and become 'How does the college impact the condos?'," Ravetch said.

"It's a question of basic incompatibility," he continued. "Putting quarter-million-dollar condominiums next to a farm is just not wise. We feel a conflict is inevitable."

Ravetch's opposition to the project is especially frustrating to the developer, Agid said, because the previous administration did not oppose the project.

"People say we took a risk when we bought this property without checking with the college first," he said. "What they don't realize is that we researched this very carefully. We talked to the then-president of the college, who expressed his support. We thought we were making a wise decision."

Some of the people opposed to the development have suggested that the college district buy or trade for the Mayer Group's land in order to protect it from being developed.

The district owns about 80 acres of land in Northridge that it bought in the 1960s for a college, but no longer needs. A trade has been suggested—and Agid said the developer "would be very much interested, if we could receive an equal value in land for our land."

District officials, however, said they could not approve such a plan for two reasons. First, the district needs the money from the sale of the Northridge property to build Mission College campus in San Fernando. Second, the district could not afford to have land sit idle.

Other solutions appear equally infeasible, so it seems that the two sides are headed for a collision somewhere in city government, most likely in City Council.

Councilwoman Picus said she is ready to take the fight that far.

"Sure, I'll continue to fight it," she said. "But even if we beat it this year and beat it next year and beat it the year after that, my personal experience has been that the developers eventually get what they want."