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Taos neighbors decry affordable housing project

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Developer Alexander Schoenseld answered questions to an eager audience during Tuesday's (March 12) town council meeting. Schoenseld is proposing a new housing development on Weimer Road.

Neighbors voiced their opposition to an affordable housing project during a town of Taos council meeting on Tuesday (March 12). The proposed Ochenta housing development on Herdner Road would bring 72 units of affordable housing to Taos, according to the developer Steve Crozier.

The Ochenta project has been presented as a design sketch to neighbors and the council and was scaled down from 86 to 76 to 72 housing units on Herdner Road between Salazar and Paseo del Pueblo. Adding these units, according to town officials, would reduce a growing need for housing in Taos.

Eric Gladstone, a longtime resident of Herdner Road, has been especially vocal to the council and is hoping they will stop the project, or at least scale it down to a smaller density on the nearly five-acre property.

"I felt this was a done deal from day one," he said during the meeting. "This is not the best for Taos and the people you're trying to help."

Gladstone and his neighbors argued that the project had little to no public input or notification to the neighborhood and would increase traffic and noise in the area at the current 72-house density.

“This is a very difficult decision,” Councilor Pascualito Maestas said after hearing neighbors’ concerns. “We are also considering the cost of living for the people here.”

Ochenta is proposed for the former Taos County maintenance yard, which was transferred to the town in 2018. The town transferred the property to Crozier under the terms of the affordable housing ordinance, which allows the town to transfer property for the intentions of building apartments or houses for lower income residents.

Other residents in the area, like Fernando Cordova, were concerned that the needed steps and studies had not been completed for the area. Town Manager Rick Bellis assured the neighbors that a traffic study was to be conducted in the future, pending a redesign and repave of Herdner Road.

Despite neighborhood concerns, Town Councilor George ‘Fritz’ Hahn affirmed that the town was in need of more housing units but that the council would work to find the best fit.

“We are short over 600 units in our community and we must address that,” Hahn said during the meeting. “This project is workforce housing. This is not low-income housing.”

Ochenta is projected to base the rent of the apartments off affordable housing models which projects rent at nearly 30 percent of median household monthly income.

Crozier has said in the past the units at Ochenta would rent for between \$450 and \$700 per month.

The council did not vote on the proposed housing project and directed staff to look at a traffic study for the stop sign at Hill Drive and conduct a drainage study.

The council also approved a zone change for a potential subdivision development in the Weimer Road area where applicant Alexander Schoenseld is proposing an affordable housing subdivision.

Schoenseld applied to rezone the property on the corner of Paseo del Cañon and Weimer Road eventually to build a housing subdivision. The zoning change from C1 to R14 allows the developer to build residential housing units rather than retail or entertainment businesses.

Only half of the land has been rezoned, and developer Alex Abeyta has plans to redo a drainage arroyo to better serve the flood drainage in the area.

Neither development is on the table for approval at the moment and the council heard preliminary decision on both. No construction has begun on either plot of land for the proposed developments.