

Plans approved for Rio Del Mar subdivision

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SANTA CRUZ — County supervisors last night approved plans for a 51-home subdivision on a Rio Del Mar site that developers have had their eyes on for more than 20 years.

After hearing some objections from neighbors, supervisors unanimously approved the application by Rio Highlands investors, headed by Aptos developer Steve Mills and Don Driscoll, the Watsonville strawberry grower. The project will be known as Rio Highlands.

Driscoll said he hopes to begin construction in the spring and have 15 units completed next year on the 15-acre site on the northwest side of Rio Del Mar Boulevard, 500 feet south of Clubhouse Drive. The site is sometimes known as the Dennis property because it was once owned by Dr. Robert Dennis.

Mills and Driscoll bought the land in 1989 and planned to build, but real estate prices dropped, and they had to delay the project. There were a number of alterations to the project as it moved through the Planning Commission, staff review and community meetings with the developer.

A dozen people objected to aspects of the project last night, but

more than half of the 40 people present raised their hands when Mills asked who was there to support him.

Most of the objections were over the plan to have access to the project at Palmer Drive. Residents said there is already too much traffic on Rio Del Mar Boulevard, and the new traffic will increase accidents.

"Density, density, density is the issue," said Mike Barsi, who bought his house on Clubhouse Drive from Mills, but said he doesn't support the project.

John Presleigh of the county Public Works Department acknowledged that Rio Del Mar and Clubhouse are major arterials, but said traffic from the new project is not considered a significant impact.

There are plans to have a signal at the Rio Del Mar Boulevard interchange in 1996, which Presleigh said should reduce traffic problems in the area.

Mills said the decision to have access at Palmer Drive came several years ago after members of the Rio Del Mar Improvement Association objected to a plan to have the access farther west on Rio Del Mar Boulevard.

Mills will be required to provide eight of the 51 lots for "affordable housing," but he has the option of providing such housing elsewhere in exchange for being able to build all market-rate homes.

Elliot Wax of Aptos facetiously called Mills "a great patron of social justice" and said he should be tied down to a specific plan for the affordable housing.

Mills said any plan he comes up with must be acceptable to the supervisors. If he can't come up with such a plan, he will have to build the affordable units on the eight lots.

One possibility Mills is exploring is a contribution to rebuilding of San Andreas labor camp near Watsonville. The camp owner faces a

court order to improve conditions there.

The county requires developers to make 15 percent of their units affordable housing, which is sold to people who meet certain income limitations.

Plans to build on the property, on Rio Del Mar Boulevard across from Palmer Avenue, have been in the conceptual stages since the late Bob Marani bought the property from Dr. Dennis in the mid-1970s. There had once been a horse stable on the site.