

Pssst, county, want a free park?

Developers want to swap park land for right to build 45 homes in Rio del Mar

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APTOS — Two developers believe they have an offer the county can't refuse — a free, three-acre park in exchange for allowing 45 market-rate homes next to Deer Park Shopping Center.

Steve Mills and Don Driscoll submitted plans last week for the Rio Highlands subdivision on 16 acres commonly known as the Dennis property. The land fronts Rio del Mar Boulevard.

"If the county approves the application as submitted, I am offering to donate the land and pay for the design work and fully improve it to a neighborhood park. The park would be owned by the county," Mills said Wednesday.

But there are a couple of catches. The developers are proposing a park smaller than the four- to five-acre park called for in the Local Coastal Program. They also want to be able to move the affordable housing that's required in Rio Highlands to Aptos Village.

The park may be an acre smaller, Mills said, but the county would be getting it for free. He soon plans to submit the park plans to the county Parks Commission.

Moving the affordable housing to Aptos Village allows him build a much smaller development of single-family homes in Rio Highlands, rather than condominiums or apartments, Mills said.

The general plan and the Local Coastal Program potentially allow 106 multiple-family units in Rio Highlands. The Local Coastal Program requires that 25 percent, or potentially 26 units, must be built as affordable housing.

"Any local developer is real sensitive to neighborhood concerns and the one thing that came out loud and clear is that those who live around Rio Highlands would like to see single-family, detached homes that are consistent with what is in the area, rather than a multiple-family development of some kind," Mills said. The developers propose lots ranging from 6,000 square feet to 9,000 square feet. The lots would be improved and then sold to individual builders.

Mills said he can't afford to offer 25 percent of the 45 homes he is planning as affordable housing, and the county won't allow him to build a combination of market-rate, single-family homes and affordable, multiple-family dwellings.

So instead, he wants to build 30 "San Francisco row-type" affordable units on seven acres in Aptos Village. The ground floor of each unit would be a



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Developer Steve Mills stands where a park is planned. Deer Park Center is in background.

one-bedroom apartment for a senior citizen and the second floor would be a two-bedroom apartment for families who can't afford market-rate housing, said Mills.

Mills said he has to fight the stereotype of affordable housing that causes residents to say they don't want it in their neighborhood. The Aptos Village units, he said, will be available to people who work and make \$8,000-\$12,000 a year.

County planner Mark Deming said the developers have a few legal hurdles to jump in order to get their plans approved.

The problem is what to do about the requirement that the Rio Highlands site have 25 percent affordable housing, Deming said.

It has this requirement because it is in the Coastal Zone; the site where the developers want to transfer the affordable housing isn't in the Coastal Zone and only is required to provide 15 percent affordable housing, Deming noted.

"The big question is: Is this (affordable housing) consistent with the Aptos Village Plan and is the transfer consistent with the coastal plan?" Deming said.