NEWS

It’s a fact: Harmony Grove faces changes

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HARMONY GROVE —— Since it was first settled in the late 19thcentury, Harmony Grove, the pastoral patch of rural life situatedjust west of the Escondido border, has provided a sort of refugefrom the steady urbanization around it.

The 922-acre area remains mostly open space, with only about 150houses sprinkled along the narrow, winding roads. On most summerdays, a cool breeze blows through the valley, carrying the neighingof horses that graze freely behind their owners’ homes.

But that scenario is guaranteed to change in the coming years.The only question is how.

And the possibility of turning their slice of country livinginto just another pocket of suburban growth has left residentsfighting to have a voice in the plans.

Two competing development plans making their way through thecounty's planning department call for adding hundreds of homes tothe quiet unincorporated community.

One plan, which has been in the works since the late 1990s,hinges on a village concept, with denser housing concentrated inthe center and sparser development with more open space on theoutlying area.

That plan has generally won the support of residents, accordingto Mid Hoppenrath, who has lived in Harmony Grove for five yearsand serves as chair of the Elfin Forest-Harmony Grove TownCouncil.

"We said (to the county), 'This is a 100-year-old community,' "Hoppenrath said. "It's not just some rural area. There's historyhere."

Then there is another, recently proposed alternative plan thatmakes the area ripe for denser, widespread development more akin totypical urban tract housing. Many residents intend to fight thealternative plan.

The county is conducting environmental reviews for bothproposals before a final plan comes before the Board of Supervisorsfor a vote, tentatively scheduled for late 2006.

Of course, this is not the community's first foray into fightingto preserve its rural lifestyle.

In September 2003, after Harmony Grove residents vocallyresisted plans from Escondido to annex the community to make roomfor industrial development, a state commission released thecommunity from the city's so-called "sphere of influence."

“It was never, ‘Not in my back yard,’ ” Hoppenrath said of theinevitable development in the area. “It was, ‘Let’s plan togetherwhat goes in my back yard.’ “

That small-town feel

For Hoppenrath, the simple pleasures of a rural community definelife in Harmony Grove.

She can ride one of her four horses down the gravelly road thatfeeds to the driveway of her hilltop home to pick up the mail. Shesits on her balcony listening to the call of hawks and other birdshoused at the aviary below her property. She attends the annualIndependence Day weekend community barbecue.

“It’s like a small town, and yet you can still get a pizzadelivered here,” Hoppenrath said.

For decades, two expansive egg farms also made up an integralpart of Harmony Grove’s fabric. But with dwindling sales, and bothproduction costs and property values on the rise, the farmersdecided about two years ago to pack up and sell their land to SantaMonica-based housing developer New Urban West.

The company, consulted with the planning group and residents tohatch a plan for a 742-home development on 468 acres, including theland where the egg farms still stand vacant.

The proposed development, called Harmony Grove Village, wouldfollow the county’s proposed map for its General Plan 2020, awork-in-progress on how unincorporated areas can help accommodatethe county’s population growth in coming years.

Plans for the project show wood-framed houses forming the coreof a community that still boasts wide-open verdant spaces.

Moreover, the village would satisfy nearly all of the additionalhousing density the county would require of Harmony Grove under theproposed planning map.

Manufacturing a rural village

Tom Zanic, vice president of New Urban West, said the idea is toenhance the current residents’ lifestyle, while attracting morehomeowners to the area.

“I think there’s the recognition from folks in the area thatthere will be changes,” Zanic said. “But the idea is to have thatchange be consistent with the vision that they have (for thecommunity) and the character that they have now.”

Zanic’s company has held more than 100 meetings with communitymembers to help develop the plan.

Denser housing would be concentrated around a small centralcommercial area, while more-expansive properties would ring thevalley’s ridgeline.

At the residents’ suggestion, nearly one-third of the homeswould have enough space to accommodate horse stables —— a commonfeature of the existing houses —— and the village center wouldboast a general store, replete with hitching posts.

Harmony Grove Village would also include several park areas andequestrian trails, and would create a small web of side streets andwalkways, rather than expand the main arteries that run through thearea.

New Urban West’s efforts have even earned the approval of theHarmony Grove Spiritualist Association, the religious andphilosophical society that settled the area in 1896 and continuesto quietly anchor the community.

Certainly, the new development promises to disrupt somewhat theisolated nature of the association’s 32-home enclave nestled alongthe hills at the end of Country Club Drive. But as Rick Bradshaw,the association’s president, sees it, creating a rural village,even if it is a master-planned one, is better than thealternative.

“The population bleeding into our space is inevitable,” saidBradshaw, who last month sent New Urban West a letter giving theresidential project the association’s thumbs up. “We just have tolook at it as a matter of how that change comes as beingimportant.”

An alternative plan.

In the last year or so, after several landowners argued theproposed zoning changes would benefit some property holders morethan others, county planners proposed a second map to guidedevelopment for the county’s unincorporated areas.

In the case of Harmony Grove, the alternative map would stillinclude the village center, but would also allow for more housingtracts to fill the gentle, grassy slopes that ring thecommunity.

One project that would easily fit into that alternative map isfrom Carlsbad, developer BHA Inc., which has pitched a proposal tobuild 224 homes on 112 acres southwest of the New Urban Westdevelopment.

Those homes would sit on 5,000-square-foot lots, parcels thatwould resemble something closer to the suburban tract homes thatprevail in much of Southern California than the sparse countrysidecommunity that Harmony Grove has always had. They would also likelyattract more development.

Building the homes would require installing infrastructure suchas a sewage treatment plant for the development.

Representatives of BHA familiar with the Harmony Grove projectwere not available for comment last week.

(New Urban West recently asked the city of Escondido to considerallowing the village to hook up to the city's sewer lines. Thedeveloper's existing plans include a sewage treatment facilitywithin the development. The council has agreed to study therequest.)

The additional, denser housing project proposed by BHA would actas something of a tripwire for more infrastructure requirementsunder state and county guidelines, according to Doug Dill, a memberof the San Dieguito Planning Group. The group serves as thecounty's planning commission for the unincorporated region betweenHarmony Grove and Rancho Santa Fe.

Those requirements include building additional road connectionsto Del Dios Highway and other measures all but guaranteed to bringmore traffic and additional development to the rural community.

"What's freaking out the (Harmony Grove) community is thisalternative map that turns this (village) concept upside down andsays everything is up for grabs now," Dill said.

Protecting 'a whole other world'

Whether the county adopts the alternative or the original map,BHA could still go forward with its development. BHA has alreadybegun pursuing the project as an amendment to the county's existinggeneral plan, and is scheduled to bring the proposal before the SanDieguito Planning Group this week.

In the meantime, Hoppenrath said she and other residents intendto continue lobbying the county to push for the original planningmap, and she hopes the community can work with BHA, much as theyhave with New Urban West over the last several years.

“It almost feels like a whole other world out here,” she said ofher community. “It’s hard to get that ... so I think we need toprotect it.”

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