

Homeowners' appeal denied

City Council rejects pleas by Cragmor residents to halt student housing complex

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Cragmor residents realize that pleasing everyone isn't always possible, but they were hoping for a little more than what they got.

At the end of an emotional 4-hour public hearing Tuesday, the Colorado Springs City Council voted 5-4 to deny

an appeal Cragmor homeowners filed to halt a large student housing complex from being built near their quiet, tree-lined 1950s homes.

"A five-story apartment building in our little old neighborhood is a nightmare," said Helen Panczykowski, who lives across the street from the future Bates Student Housing. "It's going to be dev-

astating. It's going to destroy our way of life."

Neighbors objected to the City Planning Department's recent approval of a development plan that calls for tearing down the former Katharine Lee Bates Elementary School at 702 Cragmor Road

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FROM PAGE 1

and building a stair-stepped, multistory apartment complex with 621 bedrooms, primarily for University of Colorado at Colorado Springs students.

Councilman Keith King moved to deny the appeal and uphold the Planning Commission's July 16 approval with three conditions: that a west-bound turn lane on Austin Bluffs Parkway be eliminated, a \$40,000 escrow account be set up for one year to address resulting traffic issues and a barrier fence be erected between the six-lane thoroughfare to prevent students from jaywalking across the busy east-west corridor.

Councilman Bill Murray voted against allowing the proposal to continue, saying "It's one thing to say a neighborhood is changing; it's another thing to change the neighborhood, which is exactly what we're doing. We are imposing our will in the neighborhood. This is clearly a square peg in a round hole."

Council members Helen Collins, Don Knight, Andy Pico also voted against the project.

Council President pro-tem Jill Gaebler seconded King's motion, saying the city has made a commitment to develop infill, and the proposal is

"a classic infill project."

"It's hard to fit into the neighborhood, but I don't think it necessarily has to be a detriment," she said. "It will change the neighborhood to be denser and more multi-generational, but those don't have to be bad things."

Colorado Springs School District 11 opened Bates Elementary in 1957 and closed it in a 2013 restructuring plan.

No zoning change is needed to build student housing on the nearly 6-acre site, but city planning staff had deferred approval of the development plan to the planning commission because of the neighbors' concerns, said Peter Wysocki, the city's director of planning and development.

The City Planning Commission approved the project July 16 on a 6-3 vote, declaring it harmonious and compatible with the neighborhood.

The proposal is "one of the largest multifamily projects we've had in a long time that's adjacent to an area that's changing in character," Wysocki said, adding that the idea fits with what the City Planning Infill and Revitalization Steering Committee has discussed regarding infill development.

"This is an important project for the character of the neighborhood and this is important for UCCS growing its capacity as an institution," Wysocki said.

Whether UCCS needs additional student housing became a topic of debate. No UCCS official attended the hearing because the university is not involved with the project. The proposal is from a private developer, Chicago-based GG Land Group, in conjunction with a student housing development partner, Gilbane Inc. of Providence, R.I., and Colorado Springs land planning firm N.E.S. Inc. Gilbrane, which has an office in Lakewood, would build and operate the facility.

The university is growing quickly, with 15,000 students expected by 2020, said Lonna Thelen, a principal city planner. On-campus housing primarily focuses on freshmen, and while there are more housing units geared toward students underway on Rockrimmon Boulevard, North Nevada Avenue and on campus, they won't be enough to meet increasing enrollment, Thelen said.

But the apartment building would constitute a "radical change" for existing residents, with a 60-foot tall, 700-foot long structure amidst older ranch-style homes that have been well cared for, said Grant Smith, who represented the neighborhood.

"This is going to harm them extensively," Smith said. "The impact on the area is going to be huge and irreversible."

No residents spoke in favor of the construction. Some

15 residents voiced concerns about increased traffic, disturbing the peace and quiet of the neighborhood, the 621-space parking garage, potentially decreased home values, destroying mature trees and old mines that lie beneath the property.

Three initial bores into the former Williamsville Mine led the Colorado Geological Survey to call for nine more drills to determine the safest way to build a large structure on top of the mine, city planners said.

Under conditions the Planning Commission added, the developer will need to submit those tests to the CGS for recommendations and also either cap or seal the air shaft.

Thelen said the pending design includes efforts to mitigate impacts to the neighborhood, including access only from Austin Bluffs Parkway and a 6-foot fence on top of a 4-foot berm surrounding the property.

Cragmor resident Margie Schaefer called the project "an atrocity."

"There's no number of berms, trees or fences that will make this compatible with our neighborhood," she said. "We don't need this in our neighborhood. We will consider a vote for this project a vote against the citizens of Cragmor."

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