

The Orange City Council agreed to approve a zone change and the subsequent development of 39 estate homes in East Orange. The May 24 decision was unofficial, pending the drafting of a formal resolution and ordinance, which is expected to be prepared by the next public meeting.

“There will be no resolution tonight,” Mayor Carolyn Cavecche said at the onset of the council meeting that would ultimately continue well past midnight. “The resolutions have to be specific, there are too many unresolved issues tonight.”

The unresolved issues involved a controversial development that would turn 51 acres of zoned recreational open space in Orange Park Acres into a 39-unit estate tract. The acreage is the site of the former Ridgeline Country Club, featuring golf, tennis and swimming. The community opposed the zone change for houses unless the developer mitigated the lost recreational opportunities somewhere else.

John Martin Investments (JMI), negotiating on behalf of land owner Milan Capital, offered the community continued use of an existing horse arena on a small portion of another property, the former Sully-Miller site. JMI purchased the Sully-Miller land after Milan Capital bought Ridgeline and has separate development plans for it. The horse arena, leased by Orange Park Acres for the last 20 years is seven acres. JMI has offered to donate half of the acreage to an unspecified nonprofit that would operate the arena. A handful of OPA equestrians favored the transaction; most didn't.

OPA argued that half of the arena was not a fair trade for 51 acres of open space and that the “donation” had too many conditions attached to it. Those conditions included an operating entity hand-picked by JMI and a provision that if the facility was not used as an arena, the land would revert to John Martin. It was later disclosed that the unidentified nonprofit would be comprised of OPA residents who supported John Martin's development.

Other unresolved issues addressed by the council during the marathon meeting included the point at which public amenities would be added, park credits for those amenities, the duration of tract map approval, and who would ultimately own the Sully-Miller horse arena and another arena to be located within the development.

Council woman Tita Smith was the only official to note the harm done to the community by the development/horse arena controversy. A normally united Orange Park Acres is now sharply divided between those who think the Sully-Miller horse arena is worth any community sacrifice and those who want the developer to provide more inclusive recreational space. The opponents also disapprove of the city's willingness to meet the needs of an outside developer at the expense of the community and the public.

Smith offered suggestions for appeasement including allowing the current arena operator (who is it) to continue. "At least give them a seat on the nonprofit," she said, "give the community a chance to work it out. I don't want to see orange and green shirts 20 years from now." Smith was referring to council meeting attendees wearing green T shirts supplied by the developer and orange "no on ridgeline" stickers worn by project opponents.

While other council members also expressed unease with a divided community, their deliberations led them back to the developer's wishes on almost every count. The council agreed to guarantee tract map approval for 15 years, delay construction of amenities until the last house is underway and approve a grading permit before a 2,000 square foot piece of the lot currently within the county is annexed to the city.

Orange elected officials also agreed with the developer's choice of the nonprofit slated to operate the horse arena, affirming that the 3.5 acre site was a good deal for the community. The Council did ask for first right of refusal when that land was actually offered to another party.

The council also accepted a mile-long trail and another 16,000 sq. ft. riding arena within the development as adequate "park land." Developers are usually required to include "public" spaces along with housing units. In this case, the trail does not connect with other trails and the arena will be "ride-in" only, making both amenities largely inaccessible to the "public." In its only hard and fast position, the council demanded that the planned one-mile public trail bordering the development be connected to a private trail inside the estate property to create a loop.

"We asked for honest, comprehensive planning that protects the rural character of OPA, preserves what we have, retains the recreational opportunities that have been a part of our neighborhood for over 40 years and leads to a future that is compatible," OP Association President Tom Davidson told residents following the meeting.

"The final vote to abandon the community and forfeit park space in the name of another housing tract will be made by Orange politicians on June 14," he added. "The residents of Orange have already begun preparations for a referendum asking Orange voters to overturn what the politicians of our town will have wrought. Through a ballot initiative, voters can revert the zoning to recreational open space and prevent real estate speculators from replacing parks with houses."

Tina Richards, Foothills Sentry

UPDATE:

As anticipated Orange City Council passes Ridgeline project; 4 -1
Mayor Pro-Tem Tita Smith votes against the project.