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Developers plan apartment boom

By Gregory J. Wilcox, Staff Writer

Monday, April 19, 2004 - WOODLAND HILLS -- Four developers have proposed tearing down commercial developments southwest of the corner of Victory Boulevard and De Soto Avenue in Warner Center and building a massive residential and retail neighborhood with more than 2,000 apartments and condominiums, officials said Monday.

Three proposals totaling 1,964 apartments are awaiting action by Los Angeles Planning Director Robert Sutton. The fourth, a plan for 85 condominiums, was received last week and is being evaluated.

Coupled with a 522-unit project already approved for Variel Street north of Victory Boulevard, the new apartment complexes would add 2,571 rental units to the high-profile office, shopping and dining area that anchors the west San Fernando Valley. Last week, the Woodland Hills-Warner Center Neighborhood Council, on a 19-1 vote -- formally opposed the three apartment projects because of concerns about traffic and the impact the influx of residents would have on the area.

The opposition came even though the eight-member neighborhood advisory council's own planning committee had previously endorsed the plans to replace the office and light industrial properties with retail-residential. Most of the development would take place between Victory and Erwin Street and De Soto and Variel avenues with one project west of Variel.

"They all came in separately," Gordon Murley, the council's co-chairman, said of the plans. "Nothing was looked (in terms of) the cumulative effect. What is the real impact on all the infrastructure and traffic?"

The council also wants the city to order a study that takes into account the impact the projects will collectively have on traffic.

Murley said the council also has concerns about some design elements, such as how far back the buildings will be from the streets and access off De Soto Avenue. Planning committee co-chairman Andy Keowen questioned the full neighborhood council action.

"The problem with the neighborhood council is it truly doesn't represent what it's supposed to be. They take more of a preservation attitude rather than doing anything to deal with growth."

The three projects all comply with the Warner Center Specific Plan, which means they can proceed "by right." Sutton can approve or deny each project and his decision can be appealed to the Area Planning Commission.

The neighborhood council can't appeal because it was created by the city but the Woodland Hills Homeowners Organization, of which Murley is president, could. That would be up to the group's board.

Mary Ann King, planning deputy for Councilman Dennis Zine, said no action is expected for several weeks.

"He's not holding up these three projects. He knows what their (the council members') concerns are and he is working with the developers."

Developers have agreed to provide shuttle service around Warner Center for the apartment residents but the details have yet to be worked out.

Richard E. Weintraub, a partner in REW Desoto Partners LLC, did have a traffic study done for his 879-unit project on 10 acres at 6219 De Soto Ave. It includes 326 apartments for senior citizens.

That's currently where Panavision Inc., a maker of movie cameras, is headquartered. The city's Department of Transportation approved the study, which found the apartment complex, featuring a seven- and nine-story building, will have a minimal traffic impact. "The seniors generate very little traffic," Weintraub said. "I'm getting calls every day from seniors asking when they can move into this building."

The project is designed to limit the visual impact, he said. For example, the parking structure will be at the center of the complex and not visible from the street. And about 50 percent of the parcel will be landscaped.

"I think they are opposed to every project, and I was shocked because I had put in hundreds of hours trying to come up with a plan that was based on what they wanted to see," he added.

Randall Reel, senior vice president of Las Vegas-based Pacific Properties LLC, said his 522-unit project didn't need a traffic study because it will produce the same or fewer peak hour trips as the businesses that are there now.

"There are between 40,000 and 45,000 jobs in Warner Center and only about 4,000 (housing units)," he said. "There is just nowhere for all those people to live and that's been a big problem for traffic."

It will take about seven years for all of the units to be built if the plans are approved and if they will have a positive economic impact.

"All of these projects will create a lot of jobs," Reel added. "They certainly will create a lot more jobs than they are displacing."