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Padilla joins apartment fight

Low-cost housing project upsets Lake View residents

By Kerry Cavanaugh

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LAKE VIEW TERRACE -- Heeding the protests of Lake View Terrace neighbors upset over a planned affordable housing apartment complex, City Council President Alex Padilla is proposing the city buy the land from the developer and preserve it as open space.

Padilla's plan would stop a project that has collected \$1.4 million in affordable housing development loans from the city and is on the verge of construction. The city would have to iron out those financial arrangements before buying the land.

The northeast San Fernando Valley councilman will introduce a motion today directing city officials to evaluate what needs to be done to buy the property and what grant funding is available to cover the cost.

"We are committed to setting aside the bluffs as open space," Padilla spokesman David Gershwin said.

The 2.6-acre parcel on Foothill Boulevard sits on a steep bluff overlooking Hansen Dam, and park proponents envision a vista point and observatory on the property.

"This has been an issue of concern for the community for a number of years. This is the best use of the land," said resident Fritz Bronner.

The 48-unit apartment complex is almost ready for construction, said Richard Montes, executive director of Neighborhood Empowerment and Economic Development, a nonprofit developer of affordable housing.

The complex is a \$12 million project. NEED was approved for \$3.6 million in loans from the city's Housing Department, said Ruperto Albelda, the department's director of major projects.

Of that, NEED has expended about \$1.4 million to buy the land and draw up plans for the apartment complex.

But Montes said he is open to the sale if the city will cover NEED's costs, including the repayment of more than \$1 million in affordable housing loans.

"By doing this we're going to lose a lot of money, frankly," Montes said. "We're just trying to be good neighbors. We believe in what we do, but we also believe it's always good for the surrounding (community) to be supportive as well."

Neither Montes nor Padilla's office would talk about a possible sale price, though Padilla is looking at buying an option on the property to halt construction until the city could purchase the parcel, Gershwin said.

Padilla could tap \$600,000 in the Lopez Canyon Landfill community benefit fund. The councilman decides how that fund is spent.

Recreation and Parks Department officials bought a nearby 2.5 acre parcel on Foothill Boulevard last year for \$495,000.

Parks officials said they are aware of Padilla's open space proposal but haven't worked on it or sent appraisers out to determine the value of the land. Funding could be a problem, they said.

"Recreation and Parks has no money," spokeswoman Jane Kolb said.

Lake View Terrace community groups have fought the high-density housing project since it was proposed in 1999, arguing it would bring heavy traffic and soil instability on the hillside.

The campaign was picked up by the Foothill Trails District Neighborhood Council, which lobbied hard in recent months to stop the project before the developer could break ground. Their appeals won over Padilla, who thinks open space would fit in well with the new library, soccer fields and children's museum proposed for the area.

"There have been significant changes that have occurred at Hansen Dam since this project was proposed and that sort of changed the equation," Gershwin said. "It's clear the will of the neighborhood is to maintain this as open space."

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