

Proposed development brings shops, apartments —and citizen concerns

Housing needed in the city, but builder feels stymied

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AGOURA HILLS UPDATE

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EASY LIVING—The Ave's craftsman architecture style is in keeping with Agoura Hills city guidelines. Its multi-family housing component, shown above, will count toward the state's mandate for local housing. Courtesy of PK Architecture

With a \$1.75-billion commitment from the state budget and more than a dozen new bills in the works, Gov. Gavin Newsom late last year set a goal of building 3.5 million new homes over the next five years—and made a promise to meet California's housing shortage head-on.

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One developer is ready to build 118 apartments in Agoura Hills, but says progress on the project has been slow due to a number of roadblocks in the way.

"Ground zero, Agoura Hills"—as Brian Poliquin of PK architects describes it—is an 18.5-acre planned development at the southeast corner of Agoura and Kanan roads known as The Ave (Agoura Village East).

Both Poliquin and Garry Collett from the Westlake Village based California Commercial Investment Group (CCI), The Ave investor, say the residential living component combined with 119,000 square feet of commercial space make their project a perfect candidate to become Agoura Hills' new city center.

But because the project lies at the foothills of the Santa Monica Mountains and close to Ladyface Mountain—the city's iconic landmark—concern by some runs deep.



NEW CITY CENTER?—The Ave (Agoura Village East) is hoped to be the centerpiece of the Agoura Village development along Agoura Road, between Kanan and Cornell roads, but progress has been slow. Courtesy of PK Architecture

Opponents are using delay tactics they hope will keep construction at bay or, at the very least, scaled back. Because Ladyface is nearby, they want the store, restaurant and apartment buildings to remain low-profile. Developer Collett said the positioning of his buildings respects the natural topography of the area.

Collett also told *The Acorn* that even though his group has some \$3.5 million invested in plans, renderings and approvals, it still could be two more years before an Ave shovel even hits the ground.

He said his project maintains a connection to the community, and he promises the completed center won't be immediately flipped (sold) to an out-of-area owner as some are fearing.

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"We're in our own backyard. It's a beautiful center that we'll own and keep," Collett said.

Community involvement

Last November the City of Agoura Hills held the first in a series of workshops to review the 2008 Agoura Village Specific Plan, the city's blueprint for turning Agoura Road between Kanan and Cornell roads into a new town center. The Ave is penciled in as a possible crown jewel of the Village. More than 100 people attended the November workshop. Another public meeting looking at Village plans will be held in coming weeks.

The Ave developer has a vested tentative tract map and a deemed-complete application for their project and its 118 apartments, 120-bed hotel and shops. The proposal awaits further review by planners, but the builder fears that the next step—environmental approvals and public hearings— will be slow in coming and will further delay construction of the much-needed multi-family housing in the city.

The developer says they are trying to be respectful of the project's positioning in a sensitive environmental area.

"We needed something more organic that was suburban and fit the shape of the site," Poliquin said. "It's a project that's worthy of having a real nice sense of place."

Using information gleaned from the Agoura Village workshops, the City Council says it will be reviewing the decade-old Agoura Village plan to see if changes are warranted. While The Ave development appears to be grandfathered in, that doesn't mean the project will have smooth sailing ahead.

Opponents want to eliminate the hotel, a driveway entrance to the development on Kanan Road, and all high-intensity lighting on the lot. While traffic on busy Kanan remains a worry, the number of cars traveling in an out of the project on a given day can be a moving target depending on whom you ask.

"(Traffic) is one of the concerns, but you can only get out of project (turning) right," said The Ave spokesperson Don Dusablon. "There's no cross traffic."

Community opposition groups such as STACK (Save the Agoura/ Cornell Knoll), PRISMM (Protectors and Residents in the Santa Monica Mountains) and SOS (Save Open Space) are playing the long game, hoping that with enough time and money expended by the developer, the same fate will befall The Ave as Cornerstone, a proposed mixed-use development farther east at the corner of Agoura and Cornell roads that was stalled last year by litigation.

STACK won a lawsuit against Cornerstone and the city over the need for an updated environmental impact report. The verdict was appealed. Steve Hess, STACK spokesperson, said litigation against the Agoura Village project doesn't have to be the answer.

"We would love to settle this with the developer and the city and the people jointly," Hess said. "I really think there is a sense with the people I know, that we try to solve this and stay out of court."

"This is not about no development because Agoura Village is coming," PRISMM president Rae Greulich told *The Acorn* last year. "It's about a development that's in keeping with the original vision of the Agoura Village Specific Plan that maintains Agoura Hills' uniqueness."

'Scale and safety'

Hess said the "larger issue" is safety.

"We're looking at it through the lens of the Woolsey fire and things have changed," he said. "One hundred and eighteen residents and the businesses below them trying to get out in an emergency is not an insignificant thing," he said. "For most of us, it's just an issue of scale and safety."

Hess said he wants to see "something lovely and purposeful and well designed that really preserves the views of the mountains." The builder says their plans will keep Ladyface in full view from all angles and traffic at minimum, and that it's a project whose time has come.

While the prospect of several new residential and commercial developments targeted for south of the 101 Freeway has frightened some, the developers and city officials responsible for overseeing their projects remain convinced that Agoura Village will eventually come to life.

The Ave—the most advanced Village project to date replete with a housing solution—will be a litmus test.

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