

Developer sponsored land-use bill

By Kerry Cavanaugh
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A state law proposed by Assemblyman Felipe Fuentes that would limit L.A.'s ability to control land use was sponsored by a developer whose Tujunga project would benefit from the legislation.

The move has infuriated Los Angeles City Council members, who voted last month to oppose the state intervention in local land-use decisions.

This week, some members said they are appalled that the bill appears designed to aid a particular developer.

"It is inconceivable to me that a bill would be designed only for the city of Los Angeles and for a specific developer," said Councilwoman Wendy Greuel.

"Anyone I've spoken to has indicated it's a bad idea to have one developer dictating state law for his own personal gain."

Fuentes' office acknowledged that the bill was sponsored by MWH Development, a Woodland Hills-based company that has sought to build 229 single-family homes on the Verdugo Hills Golf Course in Tujunga.

But Fuentes' chief of staff, Raul Bocanegra, said the legislation is more broadly aimed at ensuring that housing developers are treated fairly and not blocked by NIMBYs.

Fuentes' bill, AB 212, would limit the city's ability to make zone changes in areas where the community plan is not consistent with the general plan. If passed, the law would require the City Council to consider a residential development based on the density allowed at the time a project application was filed.

"If you have a community plan in place for 20 years, there is a certain level of expectation a developer should have," Bocanegra said.

"If all of a sudden the rules get switched ... we find that a little disingenuous when it comes to treating these builders and developers fairly."

The bill would thwart an effort by Greuel to dramatically limit development on the Verdugo Hills Golf Course land.

Residents in Tujunga, La Crescenta and Glendale have banded together to fight the proposed development and preserve the golf course.

In response, Greuel, who represents Tujunga, introduced a motion to down-zone the land in March 2007, which would allow approximately 12 homes - instead of 229 homes.

MWH filed its development application in July 2007 and is currently working on an environmental impact report for the project.

Developer Mark Handel has said he's a willing seller of the land if the price is right. The more homes he can build on site, the higher the value - and price - of the land.

The bill's language doesn't specifically mention the golf course development, but MWH and its lobbying firm initiated the law change. And an analysis prepared for a hearing Wednesday at the Senate's Local Government Committee lays out the golf course project in the background and explanation of the bill.

MWH Spokeswoman Joan Kradin said the company filed its application and believes its ability to build under current zoning is protected.

"The development rights of the golf course are vested by the application. AB212 might help but isn't necessary."

Still, the bill caught community and political leaders by surprise and raised eyebrows, especially an urgency clause that would enable the legislation to take effect immediately if approved and signed by the governor.

"It raises questions. It makes us curious as to why (MWH) would sponsor that bill," said Karen Keehne Zimmerman, who heads the committee to preserve the golf course.

The bill was one of the first introduced by Fuentes, who was elected to the Assembly last May. Fuentes had been chief of staff to former Councilman Alex Padilla, who represented the Northeast Valley before he was elected to the Senate.

MWH has several projects in the Northeast Valley and contributed \$2,000 last April to Fuentes' campaign. Former Padilla deputy Mark Dierking now works for MWH.

The bill will be heard for the first time Wednesday.

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NOTE: Assemblyman Fuentes pulled the bill for the June 4 hearing. It was reset for Wednesday, June 18.