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Verdugo Hills bill gets pulled

Proponents of preserving golf course hope move ends plans to turn site into homes.

By Jeremy Oberstein

GLENDALE — The author of a controversial bill in the state Assembly that could have paved the way for a developer to build more than 220 homes on the Verdugo Hills Golf Course pulled it from consideration Monday, after a firestorm of controversy and questions about its alleged impropriety.

Assemblyman Felipe Fuentes' proposed bill, which does not specifically name the Tujunga golf course but was narrowly tailored to apply to the city of Los Angeles, would have required the city to approve developments according to the standards of the general plan at the time the development application was filed.

If it had been approved, AB 212, could have allowed Woodland Hills-based MWH Development to build 229 detached single-family homes on 24 acres of the 63-acre golf course.

The bill would have overruled the objections of the Los Angeles City Council and others opposed to the project who maintain that constructing new homes in the region would increase traffic and burden nearby schools and infrastructure. Additionally, the bill would have forced city officials to adhere to state law in this instance, essentially displacing land-use decisions from local communities into the state's jurisdiction, officials said.

The bill was set for its first committee hearing on June 18 but seemed headed for doom after it was learned that Fuentes had ties to MWH, including at least \$5,000 in campaign contributions from the development firm's president, Mark Handel, according to state records. The connection set off a round of questions for Fuentes, with some wondering if he wrote the legislation to help Handel and other contributors.

Fuentes could not be reached for comment Tuesday, and Handel would not comment on campaign contributions, but did say he is actively trying to unload the property that may be worth about \$12 million.

"We are working with the council office on a methodology by which to sell the golf course to the city of Los Angeles," he said. Representatives for Los Angeles City Councilwoman Wendy Greuel — who has opposed the project and the vacated bill — confirmed city efforts to purchase the property, saying that the main objective is to save the green space.

"We are working in concert with Mr. Handel, committee members, state legislators, the city of Glendale and the county to try and purchase the property," Greuel's Communications Director Ben Golombek said.

"We hope to still achieve that. We were not pleased they attempted this end-run, but at the same time we have to focus on the goal, which is to preserve the land and were pleased that the bill was shelved and open space is preserved."

Though the Glendale City Council has gone on record opposing the project, it has not committed to purchasing the property.

"There is a clear consensus to see that the property is preserved in some way, but the council has not voted to take up the [purchasing] until the environment review occurs," Mayor John Drayman said. "We are not in negotiations to purchase the land."

Still, any joint effort to preserve the land would appease critics of the project who promised vigilance in the face of what they fear will be continued efforts by MWH to develop the course.

"We have to keep a watchful eye," said Sharon Weisman, a member of the Crescenta Valley Heritage Committee.

"I really hope Los Angeles County and the city of Los Angeles can step up and purchase it and run it as a regular golf course and public park. We need to keep putting pressure on government agencies."

Glendale News-Press: <http://www.glendalenewspress.com/articles/2008/06/11/news/gnp-verdugo11.txt>