

NEWS

360-unit farmworker housing project near Camarillo on its way

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The largest known housing project dedicated to use for farmworkers and their families in Ventura County has been approved and is due to break ground next year.

The Spanish colonial-style complex on the edge of Camarillo will offer up to 360 apartments ranging from one to three bedrooms, making it what may be the largest such project in the county's history.

Also offered will be auxiliary facilities such as playgrounds, a basketball court, two community centers and a garden area, according to the project description. Assuming an average occupancy of three people per unit, more than 1,000 people could live there if the project is fully completed.

The complex will cover half of a 36-acre site at 2789 Somis Road, located on unincorporated land on the edge of Camarillo and southwest of Somis. Half of the site will be devoted to the project and the other half will remain in agriculture, according to the proposal that went to the Ventura County Board of Supervisors.

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The approval by the board earlier this month was the last land-use authorization required for what's called the Somis Ranch Farmworker Housing Complex. The first residents could start living there in two years, said Patrick Shanahan, who is overseeing the project for builder AMCAL of Agoura Hills.

"We believe this is just a drop in the bucket to house the farmworker community in Ventura County," he said.

'Huge investment'

The CEO of the Farm Bureau of Ventura County urged the board to approve the complex, calling it a "huge investment" in the well-being of the county's critical agricultural workforce.

"Far too many of these essential workers live in crowded, substandard conditions due to the difficulty of finding affordable housing in a very expensive region," CEO John Krist wrote in a letter to the board. "As a consequence, the COVID-19 pandemic has hit them particularly hard."

More: Over 300 farmworker housing units proposed for agricultural land near Camarillo

Supervisors have historically preferred that farmworker housing projects be built within cities where residential development is concentrated, not the farm-studded unincorporated areas they oversee. But they revised a land use law in 2015 to identify farmworker housing as an approved use on land zoned for agriculture, county officials confirmed.

This would be the first such project to be approved under that revision, said Louise Lampara, who addressed the board on behalf of two agricultural trade groups.

"Your decision today will determine more than just the future of this project, it could determine whether others will even attempt to construct farmworker housing facilities in the future," she told the board.

Housing advocates know of no permanent family housing of this size that has ever been built specifically for farmworkers in the county. An Oxnard dormitory facility for migrant workers reportedly once housed 2,000, but a spokeswoman for the new owner said a maximum of 441 stay there now under normal conditions and up to 300 amid COVID-19.

No families reside at the site on Fifth Street, said Mari Escamilla, spokeswoman for owner Reiter Affiliated Companies.

No SOAR vote

Planning officials found the Somis Ranch farmworker complex consistent with the county's signature Save Open-space & Agricultural Resources or SOAR measures, which require public votes for development of farmland. The project is for an agriculturally related land use and no changes in zoning or the county's general plan are required, so no vote is needed, according to that analysis.

An environmental analysis deemed the loss of 18 acres of farmland for the project a significant and unavoidable impact, but the board adopted a statement of overriding considerations in light of the housing need.

Supervisors approved a development permit for the project and a special-use permit for the waste-water treatment plant that will be erected on site. The plant will provide sewer service to residents of the complex exclusively, but also generate recycled water for irrigation of nearby fields and improve poor groundwater quality, agricultural officials said.

From November: Farmworker assistance program gets \$3 million boost after Ventura County sees high demand

Krist said the yields from avocado and row-crop production in the area are dangerously low and that those operations likely are not economically viable in the long term.

"Treated wastewater from the on-site sewer plant will be of much higher quality, and the owners are counting on that to improve their irrigation supply so they can stay in business," he told the board.

The complex could not hook up to the Camarillo sewer system without a vote of the people to expand boundaries permitted under SOAR — a prospect that a representative of developer Somis Ranch Partners deemed a deal killer.

A SOAR vote and associated delays would stop the project, planning executive Lisa Woodburn told the board.

Somis concerns

Some residents of Somis raised concerns over the project's impact on the town of 3,200, including schools, traffic, water supply and fire response.

"Please do not overwhelm our small community with the 37% increase in population that this project represents," resident Waldemar Janowski said in an email to the board.

Children from the complex would attend grade school in the Somis Union School District, where officials have reported adequate capacity for youngsters moving into the first phase of 100 apartments, said Justin Bertoline, the county planner handling the project. The district is looking at buying modular buildings for the later phases with the cost offset by developer fees, Bertoline said.

The board added several conditions to its approval, including the developer's commitment to work with Caltrans to build a traffic signal on Highway 34 at the eastern access to the project.

Board Chairwoman Linda Parks raised concerns about potential odors from the waste-water plant and the ability of the Somis school district to absorb a large influx of students.

Still, she was impressed by the number of farmworker families that could be housed. She noted that many affordable housing projects are much smaller than this one.

"You see city projects where 20 of the 360 units are affordable," she said. "That weighs heavily."

Barbara Macri-Ortiz, an attorney for developer Somis Ranch Partners, said projects she has seen have delivered 25 to 50 units of affordable housing for farmworkers and their families.

"Three hundred sixty families, that's huge," said the longtime advocate for farmworker housing.

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