

Venice affordable housing project altered

County Commission approves builder's requested changes; some residents still not satisfied

CHLOE NELSON

Staff Writer

SARASOTA — Following a developer-initiated community meeting in May, Venice residents living near the planned affordable housing project off Clermont Road are still not satisfied.

But the Sarasota County Commission thinks differently, unanimously approving requested changes for the Venice Avenue Apartments project on Wednesday before complimenting its leaders for working with resident concerns.

Down the road, the same project is up for a rezoning, too.

Wednesday's requested changes included downsizing the four-story apartments to just two and reducing the number of units from 135 to 114 but still offering 69 units at affordable rates on seven and-a-half acres.

The property is outside the city off Clermont Road, south of East Venice Avenue, on land owned by Venice Mayor Nick Pachota, his parents and his brother.

Mark Vengroff, whose One Stop Housing organization is a partner in the project, is the manager of the development, which was approved for \$11,224,752 in Resilient SRQ funding and offer at least 69 units that must be affordable for at least 40 years.

At Wednesday's commission meeting, Vengroff asked for a height reduction after speaking with residents and three neighborhood associations near the project site about it impacting their privacy.

He told officials that he still requested to retain the full grant amount, despite saving \$4.5 million from cutting 21 units. Vengroff said he is losing revenue from having to give up some workforce units to still offer the agreed upon 69 units at an affordable price.

Residents' three other main concerns, flooding, draining and traffic, were also addressed.

Tom Sakarsky, a certified planner with RVI Planning Landscape Architecture, told commissioners that the reduction in units helped decrease drainage outflow from the project site, which would better serve the surrounding community.

After the project is built, some residents still worry that Clermont Road — which is about a quarter of a mile long — will be overloaded from serving too many neighborhoods.

"That's four communities to equal over 450 vehicles, all without a stoplight on Venice Avenue," said Jude Uebersetzg, resident of the adjacent Verona Reserve community, at Tuesday's commission meeting.

According to documents, the project's developers ran their own traffic study with the 135-unit number.

It shows a total of 649 trips would happen per day, with an estimated 49 cars at peak morning hours and 62 at peak afternoon hours.

Between vegetative buffers, a retention pond and the woody area at the edge of the property, Vengroff was confident residents would feel better about the project.

"I think we checked all the boxes for them," he said. "Quite a few of the neighbors probably just don't want anything there, but eventually something's going to go there. And, you know, we're trying to be as good of neighbors as possible."

Some residents still feel like something is missing.

At Tuesday's commission meeting, about 20 residents showed up in matching T-shirts that depicted their opposition to rezoning Clermont Road.

Ethel Green, who lives in the adjacent Verona Reserve neighborhood, feels that nearby communities were not considered before commissioners, "lacking many pieces of the puzzle," initially approved the project.

For one, the project does not "blend" with the Venice residential area of all single-family, single-story homes, Green said, whereas past projects with Vengroff were placed around other apartment-style areas.

"It just doesn't fit, whether it's 135 apartments or 114," she said.

Uebersetzig had also raised concerns about impacted wildlife on the project site, which her property backs up to.

Parts of the project plan detail tearing down their habitats, she said, like fruit-producing shrubs that the couple said they've seen a group of cedar waxwing birds eating.

Commissioners voted unanimously to approve the requested changes to the Venice project, reminding residents that affordable housing is a priority for them and people like Vengroff make an effort to include them in that process.

"Venetians tend to be very loud, and they tend to tell you exactly what they feel, as subtle as a brick to the face sometimes," said Commissioner Joe Neunder. "But I think that this is a very thoughtful first step in this process."

"We're sensitive to these things, and we always are," said Commissioner Tom Knight. "We can't say no forever on a property like that."



Venice residents living near the Venice Avenue Apartments project site off Clermont Road attended Tuesday's Sarasota County Commission meeting in matching T-shirts to voice their opposition to parts of its plan.

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