

Housing approved despite skepticism

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By Alan Blank

A new three-story complex slated for West 18th Street in Costa Mesa got the green light from the planning commission despite staff objections that the project might not be what the developers were advertising.

The three-story, 34-unit complex adjacent to the Sea Breeze Villas is billed as a “live-work” development, with the ground floor of each building meant for a home office to address the needs of workers who have few employees or customers. Because it’s considered a live-work project, the developers may make the complex higher density and with less parking.

These allowances are part of a City Council initiative to create live-work housing around the city, but city staff and the two dissenting planning commissioners, Eleanor Egan and Jim Fisler, doubt the building will be used for that.

“I think this is a high-density residential project in disguise,” Fisler said. “I’m all for redeveloping the Westside, and I like the idea of live-work. What concerns me is the size of the work area, which is about the size of half a garage.”

Fisler echoed one of the major concerns of the planning department, which is that the lower floor is not big enough to accommodate a real office, and might end up being used as a den or an extra bedroom.

When projects like this one don’t appear designed to ensure their use as live-work units, then the projects might end up as residential properties, said Senior Planner Mino Ashabi. For this reason, the city staff recommended that the planning commission deny the developer’s application, but Ashabi is not surprised that the project went through anyway.

“I think the excitement of having the first live-work project in that area had a lot to do with the decision,” Ashabi said.

Developer Brian Coggins countered the charges that the work spaces were too small by comparing his proposed development to two other similar type developments that had smaller work spaces. He emphasized that the project is designed to serve artists and designers, which he said compose a large portion of the population on the Westside.

“What you’re looking at is a testament to the city’s urban plan,” Coggins said.

A major benefit of the project, as Coggins sees it, is that its residents would not have to commute to work. He enlisted the help of former mayor and Daily Pilot columnist Peter Buffa and a group of his friends, who all got up and spoke in favor of the project, to lobby the commission.

“There’s a demographic that we’re not addressing here,” Buffa said, referring to young professionals with budding businesses.

Only two residents of the Sea Breeze community, including the Homeowner’s Assn. President Kirsten Mangers, came to speak at the meeting and both were mostly supportive of the project. They did have concerns on how the project’s height might affect their privacy and concerns about traffic and noise that the development might bring.

Most of their issues were addressed, they said, when the developer offered to reduce the size of the rooftop decks and lower the project’s height.

With the support of commissioners Jim Righeimer, Sam Clark and Chairman Donn Hall, the project was approved 3-2. The approval is final unless someone from the Costa Mesa City Council or the community appeals the decision.
