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Patterson Ranch debate brewing

Fremont City Council to hear initiative presentation Tuesday, make decision within 10 days

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Inside Bay Area

FREMONT — The City Council will hear a report Tuesday on an initiative, filed by an environmental group, that would prevent the development of 800 homes on Patterson Ranch.

But debate already has started brewing, as even some environmentalists have voiced concern about the potential pitfalls of the proposed initiative.

Backed by the Friends of Coyote Hills and Fremont, the initiative would designate more than 500 acres east of Coyote Hills Regional Park in North Fremont as the "Coyote Hills Natural Area." It also would change zoning designations on roughly 420 acres of that land for farming and agricultural use.

But planning consultant Richard Frisbie, the Patterson family's representative on the development, says he believes the proposed 800-home development would be friendlier to the environment than would the grass-roots group's initiative.

"The initiative won't create open space," Frisbie said. "And it usurps the normal process that the city has used for the last 50 years in processing developments in Fremont."

Some environmentalists agree, among them Donna Olsen, chairwoman of the Tri-City Ecology Center, a Fremont-based nonprofit dedicated to preserving the local environment.

"I would like to have seen the development go through all of the city's planning and political processes, and see what kind of plan comes out," said Olsen, who does not support the initiative.

Olsen said the initiative does not do enough to protect Coyote Hills and fails to:

- Buffer the current park.
- Provide the ability to expand the nearby willow grove and bird habitat.
- Allow expansion of wetlands on the property's western side.
- Provide public access to the remaining Patterson Ranch property.

But representatives of Friends of Coyote Hills and Fremont strongly disagree.

"This initiative will truly limit the heavy, massive, harmful development with hundreds and hundreds of homes that the developer is proposing," group spokeswoman Elaine Szeto said.

In contrast, the initiative calls for eight homes with 80-acre parcels each, Szeto said. She also points to the growing number of environmental groups that have endorsed the initiative, including the Sierra Club, Ohlone Audubon Society, California Native Plant Society, Bay Area Transportation and Land Use Coalition, Alameda Creek Alliance and Greenbelt Alliance.

To start the initiative process, Friends of Coyote Hills and Fremont submitted 13,265 signatures to Fremont City Hall last month. Nearly 12,000 were certified by county and city election officials on May 30.

Frisbie, who worked as a planner for the city of Fremont for four years in the 1960s, said the initiative's filing last month came at a time when he was working with the community to address their concerns. He held four community workshops last year and recently lowered the number of proposed homes from 1,200 to 800.

The San Mateo planning consultant said the development's variety of unique features would help meet some of Fremont's needs.

Frisbie pointed to plans for the development to pay for construction of a Fremont public elementary school.

His most recent plan also calls for up to five parks, 120 affordable homes, a church and new trails and bio-swales, and would preserve wetlands, a willow grove and visual corridors along Paseo Padre Parkway.

The development also would give 245 acres of Patterson Ranch land to the East Bay Regional Park District.

"There are a lot of goodies in this plan," Frisbie said.

After Tuesday's meeting, the City Council will have 10 days to decide whether it simply should adopt the initiative as an ordinance, thus eliminating the need for a ballot measure; or put it before the voters in November.

Olsen worried that a passed initiative, which would need another initiative to repeal it, would not allow for any changes that may help the land — "whereas, I think we can work with a developer (to improve the plan)," she said.

But, Friends of Coyote Hills and Fremont want the issue to be put to a vote.

"The initiative will give Fremont voters a chance to voice how they think the land should be used," Szeto said. "We're preparing a campaign to build on the support we've already seen."

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