

REPORT ROUGH ON GOLF COURSE BUT TRINITAS' OWNER SAYS ENVIRONMENTAL IMPACT REVIEW IS GOOD STARTING POINT FOR TALKS

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WALLACE - The Trinitas golf course resort - built in an agricultural preserve just east of the San Joaquin County line - will worsen air pollution, disturb American Indian archeological sites and require wider roads and a pipeline to bring water service to the area, according to a revised draft environmental impact report released Monday.

The Calaveras County golf course is controversial because it was built between 2001 and 2005 on agricultural preserve land despite repeated protests by neighbors.



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The Trinitas Golf course off of Ospital Road was constructed in the oak studded hills East of Linden.

Normally, environmental impact reports are done before developments are built. But it was not until Trinitas owner Mike Nemeo sought to also build a resort lodge and 13 luxury houses that officials drafted an environmental impact report for the 280-acre project.

That initial report, completed in 2007, treated the golf course as a "pre-existing condition." It did not consider possible damage caused by its construction, such as the loss of wetlands habitat when creek beds were lined with cobblestones and concrete.

In an unusual move, Calaveras supervisors ordered a revised environmental impact report to consider impacts created by construction of the golf course. The revised report also greatly expanded the analysis of issues such as whether the resort's wells would lower the local water table and harm the production of neighboring wells.

On Monday, Nemeo said he is pleased with the thoroughness of the report.

"It is certainly a great starting point for open dialogue - how to balance economic development opportunities with reasonable mitigation," he said.

Nemeo said he was not yet ready to discuss whether he can afford all the proposed mitigations.

Among those proposals are a requirement that municipal surface-water be piped to the site - possibly from Wallace four miles to the north or from Jenny Lind several miles to the east. Connection to a public water system would be required before Nemeo could obtain a permit to build the golf resort lodge.

Other proposals would require improvements, including left turn lanes on nearby highways 12 and 26, widening part of Ospital Road, abandoning use of one of the resort's wells and finding 200 acres of farm land nearby to place in a conservation easement in exchange for the farm land lost to the resort.

Critics of Trinitas agree with Nemeo that the report is much more thorough than the original environmental review.

"We think it is much more objective than last year's was," said Kathy Mayhew, a Trinitas neighbor who with her husband, Lew, and some other neighbors formed a group known as Keep It Rural Calaveras to oppose the development.

Kathy Mayhew said she was particularly struck by a statement that said golf courses are not legal in agricultural preserves in Calaveras County and that county staff disagrees with the previous report that said county staff had determined that a golf course was legal.

"That kind of feels like vindication, that it was not done according to the rule book," Mayhew said.

But the question of the golf course's zoning likely is to be hotly debated.

The executive summary cites a footnote in the county General Plan as justification for creating golf course-friendly recreation zoning within an agricultural preserve. Yet the General Plan says the exception that allows recreation developments in natural lands including preserves is intended for uses such as ski resorts and marinas "to accommodate the location of commercial development which is truly tied to a specific recreation resource, as opposed to all recreation-oriented businesses."

Susan Larson, a former Calaveras County planning official who now serves as a consultant to Nemeo, said she is confident that a golf course is the kind of use envisioned by the General Plan for a recreation zone, and that a recreation zone is just fine in an agricultural preserve.

"And it still allows the agricultural endeavors which are taking place on the property and being expanded to continue," Larson said, referring to the Trinitas olive orchards.

Mark Connolly, a Tracy lawyer and land-use expert who is working for Keep It Rural Calaveras, disagreed. "They are really reaching," Connolly said of Larson's interpretation of the General Plan rules on agricultural preserves.

"This isn't just a golf course. It is a 30-room lodge. It is the snack shop. It is the other special feature," Connolly said. "And the 13 houses as well. You can't just take one part of it and say we are going to designate it as recreational."

Publication of the revised draft environmental impact report launches a 45-day public comment period, after which county staff will respond to the comments and schedule project review before the Planning Commission and the county Board of Supervisors.

Contact reporter Dana M. Nichols at (209) 754-9534 or dnichols@recordnet.com.

THE RIDGE AT TRINITAS

See the revised draft environmental impact report for the golf course resort online by going to ccwstor.co.calaveras.ca.us/

A 45-day public comment period will expire at the beginning of October. Send comments by email to trinitas@co.calaveras.ca.us or by mail to Robert Sellman, planning director, Calaveras County Community Development Agency, 891 Mountain Ranch Road, San Andreas, CA 95249