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Hughes Stadium zoning decision angers neighbors but may not satisfy Lennar

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The cards have been dealt when it comes to the former Hughes Stadium land in Fort Collins, and now it's up to a national home builder to decide whether to play its hand or fold.

A divided Fort Collins City Council voted 4-3 Tuesday to split the 165-acre Hughes Stadium site on Overland Trail into two zones: one with higher density that allows more homes and one that allows fewer homes closest to the foothills.

Mayor Wade Troxell and council members Kristin Stephens, Ken Summers and Emily Gorgol voted to split the zoning. Council members Julie Pignataro, Ross Cunniff and Susan Gutowsky voted against.

In voting to divide the site between residential foothills zoning on the west and mixed use on the east, council backed its planning staff and rejected the planning and zoning board's recommendation to reduce density on the entire property and went against many of Hughes' neighbors who want the site to remain largely undeveloped.

Dozens of Hughes neighbors waving lime green cards signaling support for low-density development jammed City Hall to plead with council to maintain the site as open space or with the lowest density possible.

Resident Tamra Meurer "begged" council to protect the site. "We are crying out for our open spaces" and for the wildlife that inhabits the site, she said. A beautiful place on the edge of the city "is in peril of being lost forever," she said. "We have one last chance to protect it."

If development has to happen, she asked, "could it be low density, protecting much of the open space?"

Nearly four dozen residents spoke, many calling Hughes a special place that needs to be protected. All but three supported maintaining the property as open space or with very low

density, roughly one home on 2-acre lots.

The Fort Collins Area Chamber of Commerce and Realtors backed zoning that allowed increased density and the opportunity for more affordable and attainable housing in the city.

A Board of Realtors representative asked the council to not put any of the site in the residential foothills zone that would lessen density.

Still, council's decision makes it unlikely developer Lennar Homes will be able to build the 600 to 700 homes it wants at CSU's former football stadium. City long-range planning manager Cameron Gloss estimated the maximum number of homes would be closer to 550 or fewer.

With the decision, Lennar now has to decide if the project still makes financial sense, or if it should cut its losses.

Lennar representative Kent Pedersen made a brief statement to council expressing the company's desire to develop the Hughes site and work toward creating attainable housing in the community. He declined further comment, saying the company has been on the sidelines waiting for council's decision.

When the vote didn't go residents' way, many left council chambers yelling: "You didn't listen to us."

Council member Kristen Stephens argued that one home per 2 acres would create an exclusive and expensive neighborhood that would "exclude a lot of middle-class folks" who couldn't even think about being able to live there.

Creating zoning that transitions from higher density to lower density toward the foothills and requires four different housing types "is a good compromise," she said. "Who gets to live in our community and what kind of jobs they have is important," she said.

If it were any other parcel, Pignataro said she would have supported council's approved zoning. But she said there remain hurt feelings over CSU's decision to abandon Hughes and build an on-campus stadium.

Gutowsky said that after visiting the site at sunset on Sunday and listening to the silence, she "fully understood how precious the area is."

She called on CSU to "do something heroic" for the city and the people who treasure the open space and donate the land to the city. To Hughes neighbors, she said: "I heard you loud and

clear. This land is precious."

Lowering the density drives up development costs per unit and can result in bigger, more expensive homes on larger lots, the antithesis of Colorado State University's goal in January when it agreed to sell the site for \$10 million.

City Council in July took the lead on the site's zoning — a step typically left to the developer — directing city staff to come up with a zoning recommendation.

The purchase-and-sale agreement between CSU and Lennar was not finalized while Lennar awaited the final zoning decision. The "feasibility period," during which Lennar can walk away from the sale, has been extended four times. It now expires Dec. 16 but could be extended again.

The contract also states the deal will not go forward if Lennar doesn't believe the city will approve zoning for at least 600 homes.

The university stands to gain an additional \$16,000 for every lot approved beyond 625. But it could lose \$16,000 per lot — up to a maximum of \$400,000 — if fewer than 625 lots are approved.

CSU spokesman Mike Hooker read a statement Tuesday night from Colorado State University System Chancellor Tony Frank that said "the CSU system supports the Lennar development.

"We believe the buffers, trail connections and green/open spaces will benefit the community. We believe the housing price points represent unmet needs within the current market."

The statement continued: "We remain committed to evaluating reinvestment of a portion of the proceeds into attainable and potentially affordable housing for CSU employees, although such decisions obviously cannot be made until the zoning process is complete and the finances available to the CSU System from this project are then known."

Pat Ferrier is a senior reporter covering business, health care and growth issues in Northern Colorado.