

Developer Seeks to Erase Trail in Rolling Hills New Homes, Golf Course Seek to Remove Horse Overlay

By Vic Otten

Equestrians, a developer and a private golf club in Rolling Hills Estates are tied up for what is looking to be a real showdown over the proposed expansion of a golf course and the creation of a new housing development that would involve removing just under 228 acres of land from the City of Rolling Hills Estates Horse Overlay Zone. The equestrians are riled up, in part because the developer is refusing to incorporate a trail system that is mapped into the city's General Plan or to live up to its early promises to compensate equestrians for the loss of land by providing funds to improve other horse-related city infrastructure.

In a somewhat ironic twist, the name of the main company behind the development is Chandler Ranch Properties, LLC (CRP). Homes in the proposed development make no accommodations for horses, sheep and chickens, however. Available documentation on the \$300 million project indicates it will cover 225.5 acres and include 114 Mediterranean-style, single family homes and a redesigned golf course on the existing sites of Chandler Quarry and the Rolling Hills Country Club.

The existing golf course has coexisted with equestrians for decades, but the new course, as imagined by the Arnold Palmer Design Company, makes no such accommodation. The local equestrian community, which prides itself on the preservation of open space and public

access to a small but wonderful trail system, is prepared to fight that plan.

"Chandler wants special privileges from the city that would benefit only the small number of people that can afford to belong to this club or purchase one of the expensive homes," said Dale Allen, president of the Palos Verdes Peninsula Horsemen's Association and a longtime resident of the area. Another local, Jim Moore of Cowboy Boot Camp, said many residents are irked by the project because they feel that it could be designed in an environmentally-friendly manner that is consistent with rural aspects of the neighborhood. "They've made it clear they don't think horses and golf mix," Moore said. "What they're trying to do is develop a gated community in a horse overlay zone."

Reached by phone, CRP project manager Mike Cope said he had "no comment."

Niki Cutler, principal planner for the city of Rolling Hills Estates, stuck to the facts: "The project proposed right now, the existing general plan shows the property in a horse overlay zone. The project proposes to take the area out of the horse overlay zone. There is also a trail indicated in our general plan that the proposal does not want to keep in its plan. Ultimately it will be up to the city council to decide if they want to accept the project with the proposed changes to the equestrian zone."

Allen said that CRP appears unwilling to engage in "a meaningful dialogue"



Rolling Hills Estates community members (including the author, far left) enjoy the miles of trails that are part of the city's General Plan.

with equestrians to reach a compromise. "The developer has taken an all-or-nothing approach, which has forced us to retain attorneys and consultants to prepare for an extensive legal battle which could easily be avoided if we would be allowed to participate in the process," Allen said.

CRP completed its required Draft Environmental Report, a document that despite its heft failed to include the city's Horse Trail Map. The CRP position seems to be that the trail must be eliminated because it will interfere with the design of the golf course. But Allen is not buying that: "The trail proposed by the city runs along the perimeter of the property. It is not like it cuts through the middle. We are talking about a trail that is only a few feet wide." One interpretation of events is that Chandler simply wants to cut off any form of public access to the area.

But CRP and the country club have some hurdles to overcome before they can proceed with their plans. Foremost among them, convincing the city council it will be a good idea to compromise the vision of the community set forth in its original charter. According to the city's official Web site: "Rolling Hills Estates was

incorporated on September 18, 1957, in order to preserve its rural environment and equestrian lifestyle, as characterized by rolling hills, vast open spaces and three-rail white fences." The site goes on to tout "more than 25 miles of scenic bridle trails" but is curiously silent on the presence of a golf course. CRP also has to come up with an Environmental Impact Report that will withstand a legal challenge.

Cutler said public hearings on the proposal will begin "late this year or early next year," and that the hearing dates will be posted on the "Community Issues" tab of the city's Web site. "We will also be sending notices of the hearings to property owners within 500 feet" of the proposed development, "as required by law, as well as to other groups, such as homeowners associations, which we notify as a matter of policy."

Vic Otten is an environmental attorney and mule owner who lives in Rolling Hills Estates. For more information on the city of Rolling Hills, visit <http://www.ci.rolling-hills-estates.ca.us>; to read the CRP draft environmental impact report, visit <http://www.ci.rolling-hills-estates.ca.us/communityissues/chandler/index.htm>.