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South of 50 develops for quality control

Folsom aims to maintain high standards through managed infrastructure

By: Art Garcia for The Telegraph

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Folsom will begin flexing its boundaries in several months as initial work begins on development of the 3,600 acres the city annexed in January 2012 south of Highway 50, where 10,210 housing units are planned in an estimated 25-year build-out.

Early this month, GenCorp Inc., parent of Aerojet Rocketdyne, Rancho Cordova, sold 703 acres of development land in Folsom to WestLand Capital Partners LP of El Dorado Hills. The acquisition will be used to build 2,000 homes, commercial space, parks and schools.

Folsom already has a population in the low 70,000s. Why is it taking on an additional population of approximately 25,000 in the south of 50 project and the traffic congestion and service demands they will bring?

Because without annexation of the property, the city is landlocked. It wants to control its growth and assure new development matches the city's standards.

"We want to maintain control. We'd rather control our own destiny," explained Folsom Mayor Andy Morin.

"Managed growth controls itself," he said. "Even though we're not directly involved in the development of the land south of 50, we work with schools to make sure they get built and that the infrastructure goes in at the pace it needs to go in.

"As the population increases, we'll add firemen, police and everything needed to maintain the quality we have now," said Morin.

The city doesn't own the south of 50 property; all 3,600 acres are privately held.

"First grading of the land should begin this summer," said Kevin Carson, Northern California president of The New Home Company, the first builder, with Russell Ranch hillside development.

The planned 364-home first phase should begin construction in the spring of next year. New Home eventually will build more than 800 houses that will be priced in the \$750,000-\$850,000 range.

Sewer and water lines and other "backbone" infrastructure construction will begin in June at the south of 50 annexed property and will take about 18 months, said David Miller, Folsom's director of public works and community development.

"Before the annexation occurred, Sacramento County indicated it was interested in seeing development there," Miller added. "Do we want the county to develop there? Do we want Rancho Cordova to annex that area, because it was talking about it.

"The question of whether growth is going to happen or not isn't up to the city," he continued. "People have a constitutional right to move and live where they want, and the market determines whether people move here or not. Is it viable for people to live here?"

Obviously it is, Miller said, because people are moving to Folsom and that raises the question if growth is going to occur, how do you manage it?

"What kind of growth do you allow to occur at your doorstep?" he said. "Do you want to see the same quality approach that we currently have in Folsom or do you turn your back and let somebody else develop in the way they choose? If you look at Rancho Cordova and the county unincorporated area, it's pretty clear Folsom has standards it wants to protect."

He noted Folsom “doesn’t have an edge” for growth available in El Dorado County, Placer County or Orangevale, all developed. “So the only place this community could grow is south of 50,” he said.

Questions were answered several years ago when more than 70 percent of voters approved local Measure W that called for development south of Highway 50.

With the town center planned for the new development, Folsom will have three commercial/retail centers, including Historic Folsom and the Palladio shopping center. New residents south of 50 will shop their own town center and not further clog East Bidwell Street with traffic, Mayor Morin said.

He also pointed out the city will be adding a lane on Bidwell Street by Folsom Lake College and that plans call for two new Highway 50 interchanges at Oak Avenue and Empire Ranch Road. There also will be a new road that will run parallel to Iron Point Road, south of 50.

Funding for the interchanges will come from fees to be collected for infrastructure to go in south of 50.

Availability of water, particularly in drought years, is of concern for south of 50 but Folsom believes it will have that covered. The city’s water customers lowered its annual water consumption by more than 21 percent in 2014, among the highest rates of reductions in California.

Miller said water will be supplied south of 50 through continued conservation and new sources from rivers, lakes and underground, plus the city’s leak detection program.

Combined, with agreements to buy water from water purveyors, “we’ll have the majority of what we need to serve south of 50,” Miller said.

Also, the city is requiring that developers south of 50 install an “entire” water system for recycled water that will provide 20 percent to 25 percent of non-potable water for irrigation of parks and landscaping.