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Temecula Planning Commission approves Vail Ranch project

After decades of stops and starts, the revival of a site where key elements of Temecula history unfolded took a major step forward Wednesday night.

The city Planning Commission voted 4-0 with one absent to approve a development plan for the 4-acre Vail Ranch property off Temecula Parkway.

"This is a real save for our community," said Commissioner Dennis Chiniaeff.

A Pomona company specializing in historic redevelopment plans on refurbishing the site's six buildings and turning the property into a mix of shops, restaurants and offices.

If all goes well, the restored property could be open for business in fall 2009, said Jerry Tessier, president of the company, Artec Partners.

Darell Farnbach, head of the Vail Ranch Restoration Association, has sought to preserve the property for at least 10 years.

"We've never seen it get this far before," he said before the meeting. "And that's a good step."

Shielded from Temecula Parkway by a modern shopping center, the property played a vital role in the evolution of Temecula.

Luiseno Indians lived in the area until they were forcibly ejected in 1869, county records show. Sometime after 1859, the Wolf Store opened on the site to serve European settlers coming west.

The property was at a crossing point for the Southern Emigrant Trail and the Butterfield Stage Mail Route in the 1800s and may have been a setting in the 1884 novel "Ramona" by Helen Hunt Jackson.

In the early 20th century, the property was the headquarters for Vail Ranch, an 87,500-acre cattle operation occupying much of modern-day Temecula. The ranch dominated the area until housing developers bought up land in the 1960s. Temecula officially became a city in 1989.

Efforts to preserve the property have picked up and slowed down over the years.

In 1998, the Riverside County Board of Supervisors approved a redevelopment plan, but Farnbach and a county Historical Commission member sued, saying the plan did not protect enough acres and did little to save historical and archaeological resources.

The plaintiffs and county settled out of court.

But the property's redevelopment languished as Kimco Realty Corp., which owns a nationwide network of shopping centers, bought the site and the shopping center in 2004. Temecula annexed the property in 2005.

Now, Artec plans on restoring the buildings and adding a 7,765-square-foot retail structure. Surrounded by a three-rail split fence, the property will also have a water tower, windmill and paths for hayrides.

The property will include displays and plaques detailing the buildings' history, and the buildings will be restored in a historically sensitive fashion. Tessier put the project's cost at \$7 million. The property will be turned over to the county, which will lease it back to the developer.

Once the property is restored, Artec will be eligible for sales tax revenue set aside over the years to pay for the restoration. The revenue, estimated by Tessier at \$2.4 million, comes from sales made at the shopping center's tenants.

The Planning Commission represented the final local regulatory hurdle for the project, which has already been cleared by county supervisors, the county Historical Commission and the city's Old Town Local Review Board.

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