

A look into the land use of Valley's Edge

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CHICO — Valley's Edge, the largest development project Chico has seen, got a 5-2 recommendation last week from the planning commission and seems to be on its way to becoming a reality.

The plan, which is about 14 years in the making, came from developer Bill Brouhard who began looking into a potential development for the site when he was in his 40s. Now, at 64, he is very candid about his mortality and how he likely won't see it ever come to fruition, even if it is greenlit all the way to the end.

It's clear when driving around the sprawling 1,448 acres of Chico wildlands in his golf cart that Brouhard enjoys talking about his project and imagining it between the shallow creeks and groves of oak trees. He says the vast majority of oaks will be kept in place and that streams will remain untouched with a few exceptions for culverts.

"The whole vision is to affect people's lives," Brouhard said. "We've got a lot of subdivisions but it's too difficult to get to the parks. If we integrate plenty of open space, people can get to that easier. I think being a father showed me the importance of that. It showed me how we traditionally rely on cities to develop parks, but we don't get the master plans very often. Developers are limited by the size of the land that they can develop on. That's the defining characteristic. There's more open space than anything else."

Of the spans of rock walls, only one portion, which has already dilapidated to the point of no longer being a wall, will be leveled and built upon, Brouhard said. The rest will remain standing.

The project is split three ways. The northern portion consists of housing developments of varying densities, most of which are meant for moderate-income families with some space left for low-density custom homes. Beneath that section is a large chunk of land that will be dedicated to people ages 55 and older. The senior community will have special amenities such as a clubhouse. Lastly, the third portion will remain intact as a regional park, which Brouhard compares to Bidwell Park. He envisions this as a massive community space for people to be outdoors, and room for kids to play.

At the corner near the Skyway, the three sections converge into a community hub, including a village square and mixed-use commercial space. The closer the sections come to the center, the higher the housing density.

Brouhard expressed his passion for maintaining open park space for people of all ages to play in, frequently iterating the importance of having vast, open outdoor areas as opposed to urban sprawl and the typical subdivision plans as seen in other parts of Chico.

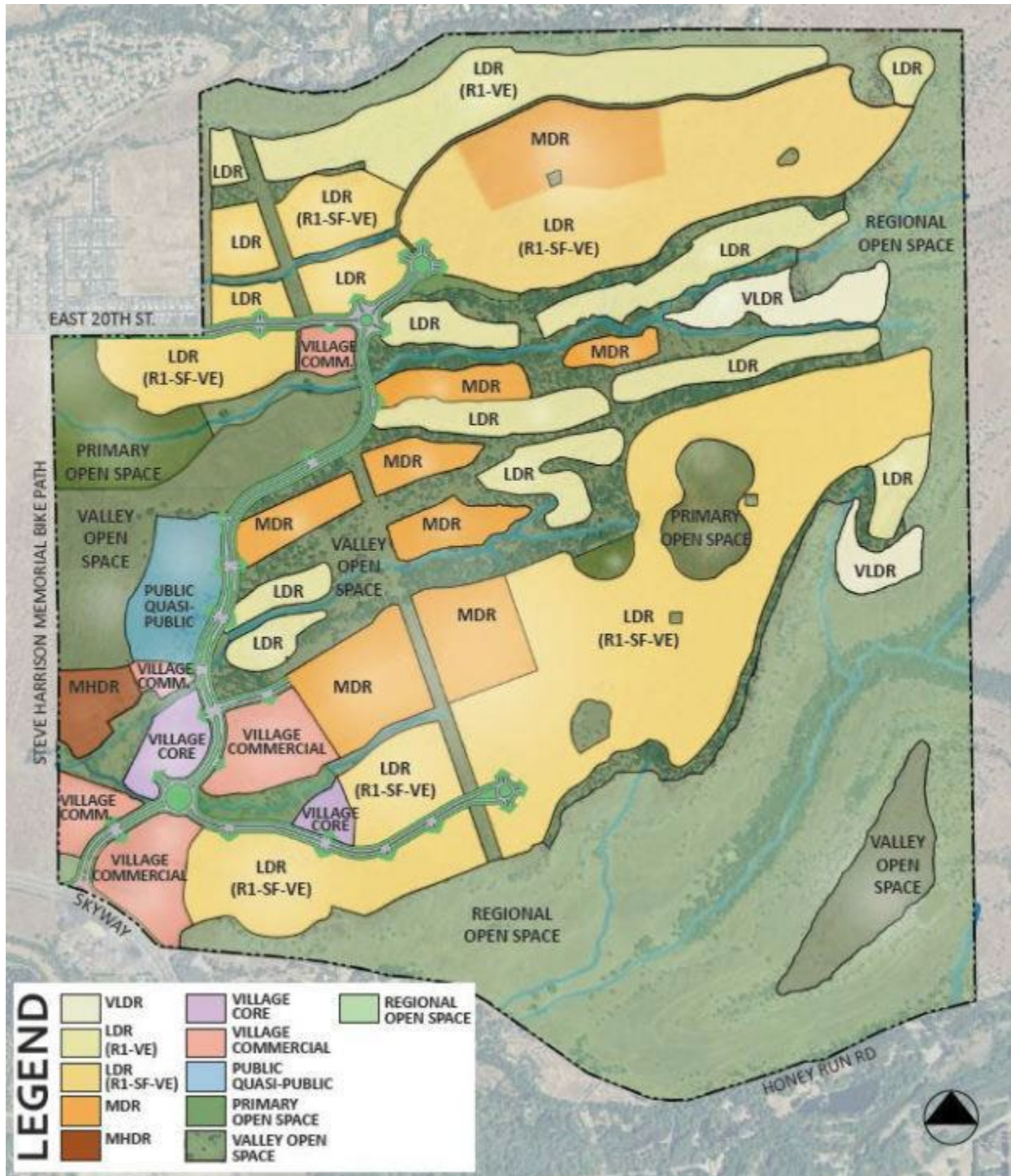
A big draw of the development project is the promise that it will keep and maintain the open space intact for the long haul, preventing other developers from using it for additional building.

Initially, Brouhard wrote up a deed to the regional park land and offered it to the city, but he said the city declined. Now, the land will be managed through the Homeowners Association tied to the development, though the offer to the city will remain open at any given point going forward should the city eventually decide to accept it.

"From a management standpoint, the legal framework for that would be the HOA," Brouhard said. "So it would be an HOA-owned asset subject to a deed that the city could accept

at any point. And then, you would have on that HOA a trails committee, you would have a water committee if we've got water components.”

Brouhard made the comparison to California Park where the dues are \$450 a year.



A map showing the land use plan of the Valley's Edge development project as was presented before the Chico Planning Commission on Thursday, Dec. 1, 2022 in Chico, California. (Bill Brouhard/Contributed)

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Water flows in a waterfall on the Valley's Edge development footprint in Chico, California on Monday, Dec. 5, 2022. (Jake Hutchison/Enterprise-Record) © Provided by Chico Enterprise-Record

One difference with Valley's Edge is that it would be open to the public for those who want access to the trails with a separate yearly payment. While he likely wouldn't have a say in what that amount would be for outsiders to use the park, Brouhard said ideally it would be around \$50 with programs to allow for people who might not be able to afford that still have access.

One of the misconceptions Brouhard wanted to clear up was in regard to mass tree removal.

"This is the most rigid oak woodland preservation," Brouhard said. "...Oak trees have an economic value anywhere from \$10,000 to \$50,000. So you're an idiot if you decide that all these trees need to come out. You also have to plant, by diameter at breast height, you have to plant the equivalent of 10 trees (for each one you remove) and you have to monitor them for 10 years."

Based on the final master land use plan, the development will add 750 acres of open park space, 250 acres of senior living space, 350 acres of family neighborhoods and 55 acres dedicated to the village core and commercial use zoning.

Opposition

The project hasn't been without controversy. Many people have come forward in opposition to the park, many of whom live close to where the development would happen.

During the Chico Planning Commission meeting Thursday, it was made clear that there would be an unavoidable increase in greenhouse gas emissions, despite the community being

planned all-electric, which would hinder the city's ability to meet its environmental impact goals going forward. Brohard was forward about the impact, stating that he and those behind the development have been planning to create a more walkable and bikeable space to reduce the need for automotive transportation, adding that it wouldn't be possible for any development such as this to happen without the same greenhouse gas emissions.

Another concern that arose multiple times at the meeting was the water issue. California is in a severe drought and many fear for their private wells and overall water usage. Brouhard assured the commission that all of the water usages in Valley's Edge would go through the private company Cal Water and a tank would be built on the site to store additional water. He said there is no anticipation of private wells in Valley's Edge.

Jared Geiser, one of many who have been following the development planning of Valley's Edge, compiled a document that lists his and others' concerns about the project and how it would negatively impact the city.

Though the project was developed with some counsel from Chico Fire Department Chief Steve Standridge, who has stated that it would not add to the fire risk in the area, many are left skeptical. As Geiser mentions in his critique, the area has caught fire on three separate occasions in the last 19 years.

Additionally, Geiser stressed the impacts the development would have on local wildlife, which the Environmental Impact Report said was more likely to see mitigation.

"The minor changes to the project incorporated in the (final Environmental Impact Report) do not change the project's impact on climate change; which threatens two-thirds of North American bird species with extinction, according to Audubon's report 'Survival by Degrees: 389 Bird Species on the Brink'," Geiser said. "The city should not continue to ignore the inconvenient truth of climate change. The fate of human society and the ecosystems of the Earth depends on climate action now."

Commissioner Bryce Goldstein, who voted no on sending the project forward alongside Rich Ober, said she couldn't ignore the greenhouse gas impact when making her decision.

"As a planning commissioner, my main task was to determine whether the overriding considerations presented to us were backed up by hard evidence and whether or not they truly outweighed the significant, unavoidable greenhouse gas emissions it has been determined that this project would create," Goldstein said. "The first consideration is that 'the (Valley's Edge Specific Project) provides for a variety of housing that will help Chico meet its long-term housing needs,' which I found to be an inadequate statement. We absolutely need more housing in Chico, especially in the wake of disastrous fires, but we need to build the right housing to meet the needs of our community."

Goldstein went on to say that the commission recently approved the housing element that shows the lack of necessary affordable and low-income housing, especially in relation to the needs of seniors.

"I did not find there to be substantial evidence to support the proposed overriding considerations, but I was open to working with my fellow commissioners to propose changes to the project that would both allow for it to supply necessary housing for our community and avoid significant harm to our environment," Goldstein said. "I suggested including more medium-high-density zoning at the base of the project area to allow for clustered, dense housing around a high-quality transit stop, with less impact on the foothills."