

Discovery Church housing project OK'd



Paul Aiken / Staff Photographer

Pastor Steve Cuss of Discovery Christian Church is leading an affordable housing effort on church property.

By Jennifer Rios
Staff Writer

Broomfield City Council gave Discovery Church and Flatirons Habitat for Humanity the green light to build affordable townhomes within the TOAD — a decision that came despite threats of lawsuits and neighbor concerns regarding traffic, oil and gas, and population density.

More than half of Tuesday's six-hour council meeting was spent discussing how the project, part of Discovery Church's larger expansion project, would affect the area and whether it should be allowed in the Transitional Overlay Area District, or TOAD.

Discovery Pastor Steve Cuss and Flatirons Habitat Executive Director Susan

Lythgoe and Chris Russell, the project's architect, laid out their plan to build 12 permanently-affordable townhome units that will be built in four triplex buildings on 1.25 acres on the northwest corner of West 144th Avenue and Zuni Street.

"This is one of the first housing plans we have that is non-profit base, faith base, local government and philanthropists all working together," Ward 2 Councilwoman Sharon Tessier said. "That is community. That is the epitome of community. Not one entity can fight this crisis alone."

Neighbors from Wilcox Estates, which lies northeast of 144th Avenue and Lowell Boulevard, came out in force against the project, some cit-

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ing concerns that the new homes will be too close to an existing oil and gas well that is expected to be plugged, increased traffic on an already-congested 144th and a possible negative impact on home values.

Residents also claimed allowing this project opened the door for other multi-family developments that take the rural neighborhood farther away from its intended character.

"I think this will really set a bad precedent and make us look dishonorable," Ward 4 Councilwoman Guyleen Castriotta said shortly before the vote. "Like we're going to start ripping up agreements."

Councilwomen Kimberly Groom and Castriotta voted against the project. Council members Stan Jezierski Elizabeth Law-Evans, Sharon

Tessier, Mike Shelton, Deven Shaff, Kevin Kreeger, David Beacom and Mayor Pro Tem Bette Erickson voted in favor.

Residents not in favor of the project also said the lack of affordable housing is "not as dire" as some people claim.

Community members such as FISH Executive Director Dayna Scott, Broomfield Salvation Army Captain Mark Czanderna, Broomfield Early Childhood Council Director Jessica Jones and realtor and affordable housing advocate Debra Meyer testified differently.

Meyer talked about the limited availability of land for development, plus the high cost when land is found. It's important to seize this project so Broomfield can increase the number of homes that can be owned by

people in the community — especially when the land is donated and the cost covered by a nonprofit developer, she said.

In April, the Denver metro area reached a new status as the fastest moving market in the country, she said, and the need for a broader spectrum of housing is "only becoming more and more critical."

"Housing values are up 9.2 percent and we currently have the highest mortgage rate in seven years," Meyer said. "Someone mentioned young adults moving back into their parents' basement, and 21 percent of recent college grads are moving in with their parents."

Broomfield has 47 licensed child care centers, Jones said, but an overwhelming number of caretakers do not live in the county because of the housing situation.

"They serve our county, our families and children, but they have a basic income of \$35,000," Jones said. "They cannot live in the community where they serve."

She kept most of her comments to science — how children develop and what role a "safe and stable" home plays in that. A child could go into "survival mode" when they don't know when they'll have to pick up and move or where their next meal is coming from.

Scott said FISH sees families who are struggling, and their No. 1 issue is housing. According to data they collect, 170 families served in the last three months were living double- or tripled-up, she said, and therefore not counted on homeless surveys.

"They face eviction and homelessness," she said.

"It's hard to find housing if they're evicted, (and) so much easier to stabilize them in housing."

Of the families who aren't doubled up, they on average are paying 70 percent of their income on housing, she said. The majority of FISH clients would not qualify for this Habitat home, but about 40 or so families would.

Cuss said the church shares neighbor concerns about the crossing at 144th and Zuni, and would love to see a crosswalk added. The city has plans to widen 144th, he said, and as to oil safety concerns, the closest homes would be 521 feet from the well, which is the safest way it could be designed.

Churches are exempt from the TOAD, Cuss said, and are protected by the Religious Land Use and Institutionalized Persons Act. Discovery, which donated the land, and Habitat, also a nonprofit, are pursuing this project to help Broomfield address its affordable housing void.

"Our bottom line is not money. Our bottom line is changed lives," Cuss said. "The housing crisis is real. Real people are affected."

People who would qualify could include firefighters, school administrators, EMTs or contract supervisors. The development will house families earning 60 to 80 percent of average median income, which in Broomfield recently jumped to \$89,000.

Gwen Young, one of the residents who will live near the homes, cited 10 car crashes at 144th and Zuni since last May, eight of those within the past seven months.

She said a lack of sidewalks in the area increases the chance of harm to children and bicycle riders.

There also are no schools within a safe walking dis-

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tance she said, with Rocky Top Middle School about four miles away and Legacy High School one mile away. Safeway also is more than a mile away, she said, and there is no public transportation for at least a mile and a half.

Other residents claimed that Habitat Homes are not well kept, which prompted Lythgoe to respond by showing recent photos taken (without the homeowners knowledge) of their outside of their properties.

Kreeger said that while he was sympathetic to the neighbor's feelings about the project and wants to defend their rural quality of life, he could not imagine the experience of "sitting in the backyard with a glass of iced tea" change whether the Habitat Homes were there or not.

Last year, a proposal for a farmette had far more homes that backed up against yards, Kreeger said, and he felt that project was

wrong for the area.

All projects have to be evaluated on their merits, he said, and that one was a clear "no."

Discovery's proposed housing is one for people who have good jobs — teachers, police officers, city staff and veterans — who want to stay in the area.

By using the same logic that the new homes can't be built because they're too close to an oil and gas well, then Broomfield should "empty out the entire Wilcox neighborhood."

Castriotta was concerned the project will have future adverse impacts on area. She was also worried that Broomfield could face a lawsuit from its own citizens.

Groom agreed that Broomfield "definitely needs something like this," but could not support a zoning change. Discovery asked that the 9.07 acres be changed from the TOAD to Planned Unit Development.