

Housing coming quickly to old Dutra site

Grading nearly completed on hillside site where 272 homes will be built

Philip Riley, Petaluma Argus-Courier, 8-16-10

A newly approved housing development at the site of the former Dutra quarry and asphalt plant is moving quickly toward construction, but despite the renewed activity, the local housing market still appears to be struggling.

Quarry Heights is a 272-unit subdivision that will be built in south Petaluma by KB Home, a nationwide housing developer based in Los Angeles. The large housing project — near where Petaluma Boulevard South passes under Highway 101 — was given final approval by the City Council last week. The company plans to start building houses as soon as this fall, having already completed most of the grading on the hillside.

The subdivision will include townhomes and larger single-family homes, spanning up the hillside next to the boulevard and Highway 101. Lots will range in size from 13,050 to 28,080 square feet and prices will start in the low \$300,000s, according to Craig LeMessurier, a KB Home spokesperson.

“We're really happy to build in Petaluma,” LeMessurier said. “It's on the hill, so we will have some homes with some good views of the valley and the river.”

The company expects to finish grading at the site quickly and start to build streets and utilities in the next two weeks. The first houses will be built in the fall, and all 272 units are expected to be built by 2015.

KB Home is a “build to order” developer, said LeMessurier, meaning that prospective homebuyers pay a down payment, walk through a home and choose certain design aspects, then finalize the sale once the home is fully built after three to five months.

“We want the homebuyer to be involved,” said LeMessurier.

As a result, the homes will be built as there is interest for them rather than all at once or in stages. The company expects to have all of the homes built within the next four to five years, depending on the housing market.

The 47-acre subdivision will include seven parks with grassy areas, trees, playgrounds and other features. One of the parks will feature a community building. A large roundabout will serve as the entrance to the site from 1600 Petaluma Boulevard South.

The development comes at a time when housing construction has undoubtedly slowed, said Sue Castellucci, the city's housing coordinator. Only 36 housing units — which includes single-family homes and apartments — were built in Petaluma in 2009. A low number is expected in 2010 as well. The average number for homes built per year is difficult to determine because some developments' plans cause houses to open in large numbers all at once, said Castellucci.

There are currently 22,661 homes in Petaluma, and the city's General Plan expects 27,949 by 2025.

A vesting tentative map for the Quarry Heights project was first approved by the city in 2005, when the application was owned by another company, Lomas Development. KB Home bought the application from

Lomas in 2006 and continued on with the city's design approval process already in motion. The project went through about 15 Site Plan and Architectural Review meetings, where changes were made to the architecture and sizes of the homes. The changes to the original map from 2005 were approved by the City Council in November 2006. KB Home started grading at the site in 2007, but work was stalled until last month due to the economy.

The development sits on land previously used by Dutra for its rock quarry, which closed at the location in 2005. A county mine reclamation process declared the site safe for development in 2007. The land was annexed from the county to the city in 2006.

The City Council approved the final map on Aug. 2 on a 4-2 vote. According to the city attorney, the vote was largely an administrative act to certify that major changes had not been made to the original project map approved in 2005. As a result, council members could not support or oppose the project since it had effectively already been approved by a different council in 2005.

However, Mayor Pam Torliatt and Councilmember David Glass voted not to approve the final map. Glass said that a community pool that was in earlier designs is not in the current design.

“What disappeared from the project was what I really liked about it,” he said.

“The tentative map was a terrible tentative map,” said Torliatt about the 2005 approval.

Other council members said that although the approval process was convoluted and drawn-out, they felt that enough improvements had been made to the grading and elevations at the site for them to support it.

“It is a teachable moment on how not to process applications,” said Healy, who added that “the final project is better than the original one.”