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## Signatures push referendum on land use

**By Tony Davis**

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Opponents of 9,400 new homes in the Tubac area will try to win at the ballot box what they couldn't win before the Santa Cruz County Board of Supervisors.

Next week, they are expected to turn in more than 900 petition signatures seeking a referendum on the board's 2-1 vote last month amending the County Comprehensive Land Use Plan to recommend approval of up to that many homes. It takes 900 signatures to force a vote.

Arguing that the two developments at issue will wreck the area's semi-pastoral way of life and natural environment, the opponents also contend the board's vote trampled on the work of people who spent two years helping the county craft a major overhaul of the comprehensive plan back in 2004.

They say the board ignored the wishes of the vast majority of residents who spoke against the developments before the Dec. 12 vote. Before proceeding, the projects would also need rezonings from the board.

"I hate to think what that development will do to the landscape," said Sally Greenleaf, a Patagonia resident who signed the petition. "There is a mystique to that area. It's so beautiful. There's a lot of history there."

A referendum would give voters in this county of 46,900 people a chance to decide how far and fast the unincorporated village of Tubac should proceed toward suburbanization. Tubac, population 1,500, lies about 42 miles south of Tucson and just south of the Pima County line.

But a referendum vote will create a divisive campaign that will force to the surface the question of whether opponents are elitist, said Andrew Courtney, principal owner of the 2,600-home Las Mesas project, one of the two at stake.

The other project is the 6,800-home Sopori Ranch development. Investor Ross Wilson, a vice president of Sopori owner First United Realty of Phoenix, declined comment on the referendum drive, saying, "Anything now would be premature."

"The supervisors who voted for this will be vindicated, but it's not in the best interest of the county to put them through this," Courtney said. "We are looking to do diversity in our development plan, to encourage affordable-type housing. This issue is not about growth — it's about diversity versus elitism."

Opponents of the project deny that charge and say they would support affordable housing in these projects if they could be scaled back in size.

History suggests their referendum drive could face rough sledding.

Out of 16 development-related referendum efforts in Southern Arizona since 1987, fewer than half killed a project outright or forced changes. More commonly, governments and courts knocked these efforts off the ballot on legal grounds, or voters have upheld local development approvals.

One such voter OK came in 2000 in Santa Cruz County for the county's approval of rezoning of more than 2,500 acres near Nogales International Airport for businesses and light industries.

Recalling that vote, supervisors Chairman Manny Ruiz said this time around, the people he has talked to on the streets say, after hearing the facts, that the projects are right for the community and that the opposition

to it in the Tubac area is based on "not in my backyard."

"That is fine, but ultimately it is going to cost everybody a lot of time and money," Ruiz said.

Opponents, however, say they've been gathering signatures furiously not only in the Tubac area but in Sonoita, Nogales, Rio Rico, Kino Springs and Patagonia, many miles from the development sites.

"The comprehensive plan was the result of months and months of study, input and meetings, but the developers have asked for amendments wildly out of step with the plan," said Lynn Carey, a Tumacacori real-estate agent who has led the petition drive.

Specifically, Carey cited the plan's recommendation for the county's northwest area that includes Tubac.

It envisions "slow, deliberate growth with the aim of preserving and maintaining the area's historic, cultural, ranching and agricultural heritage. In general, the character is of a rural lifestyle with relatively low-density population. ... People choose this area in which to live for many reasons, but also for what it is not. It is not a place of intense residential development or crowded urban sprawl with resulting traffic congestion."

Courtney said that his intent is to try to meet every aspect of the land use plan, by saving at least 40 percent of the property as open space, having pastures, maintaining historic structures. and having an equestrian center. The project will bring slow growth, since it's a 25- to 30-year buildout time, he said.

As for affordable housing, he said the project will need a certain amount of density and scale to support having some housing geared to people of moderate means. He can't say today how many total homes will be needed or what the affordable housing would cost. That will come after developers' consultants figure out other things, such as the cost of a bridge over the Santa Cruz river, the location of a sewage treatment plant, and the effects of the river's floodplain on the development, he said.

But Steve Strom, a retired astronomer in Sonoita who signed a referendum petition, said he and his neighbors have gone on record in Sonoita as supporting the kind of development that can make affordable housing work: clustering higher densities near crossroads areas, to preserve open spaces elsewhere. He acknowledged, however, that "obviously, someone who knows how to do an economic analysis would have to figure out how much money they could make" with such a project.

"Let's imagine you are a developer and you are trying to figure out strategy. The first thing you do is ask for the moon. If you get it, you are in fantastic shape and are going to line your pockets. I can't believe these investors don't have plans B, C and D ... if their projects aren't approved. They have to have thought about that."

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