



Plans for high-rises in Oxnard stand a chance, experts say

By Charles Levin
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Size matters. So does location.

That's why the Port Hueneme City Council last week rejected a 46-story condominium and hotel complex near the beach.

But size and location also explain why two other high-rise tower projects in Oxnard might work, experts said last week.

The tallest of six proposed towers is 37 stories, while four of them are smaller and within city guidelines. Also, both complexes — with three towers each — would stand close to Highway 101 near two precedent-setting, high-rise office buildings.

"We're talking apples and oranges," said Michael Faulconer, principal of Ventura-based Faulconer & Associates and a Ventura planning commissioner.

In Port Hueneme, the 46-story Pacific Pointe tower was slated for a small city-owned parking lot at the end of Surfside Drive. The only thing around it would have been two- and three-story condominiums.

"Port Hueneme is a local, small beach side community that cherishes its character and sense of place," said Faulconer, who also sits on Oxnard's Downtown Design and Review Committee. "Neighbors are fearfully defensive of that and rightfully so."

In fact, council members and opponents frequently cited community character as a sticking point during Wednesday's hearing with more than 300 in attendance.

In Oxnard, it's a much different story.

At the city's dilapidated Wagon Wheel area, Orange County-based Oxnard Village Investments LLC has proposed up to three condominium high-rises of 20 to 25 stories. Down the block at the former Levitz furniture store, San Diego-based Avion Development LLC hopes to erect three towers of condominiums ranging in height from 19 to 37 stories.

"Density is appropriate near the infrastructure that supports it, like freeways and Metrolink (rail) stations," said Chris Williamson, an Oxnard senior planner. He added that Wednesday's decision by the Port Hueneme City Council did nothing to disturb ongoing consideration of either proposal.

Costs of materials higher

Building a high-rise in Oxnard is not without precedent. The Topa Financial Center office towers — 14 and 21 stories, respectively — stand nearby on Vineyard Avenue right off the highway.

Perhaps more important, Faulconer noted, is who would live in the Port Hueneme project. Ventura-based developers Harvey Champlin and Ray Mulokas described their target market as empty-nest baby boomers, lured by dazzling views of the Channel Islands.

But building more than four stories requires concrete, steel and elevators — not sticks and bricks — which raises the costs of materials and condominiums, Faulconer noted.

"A lot of people in this county, let alone Port Hueneme, wouldn't be able to afford to buy one," he said. "You'd have to be wealthy and from out of the area to come to Port Hueneme."

While Pacific Pointe would have catered to baby boomer retirees from out of town, the Oxnard towers might lure empty-nesters who still work and could afford the condos.

In fact, Avion's project targets retirees and members of Generation X, young adults born in the 1960s and '70s who are starting families.

Champlin and Mulokas originally proposed a 20-story building on the 1.4-acre parcel in Port Hueneme. In 2005, council members embraced the idea and opened negotiations, but the yearlong agreement lapsed without action. Then last November, the developers returned with the 46-story tower project, potentially the largest structure between Los Angeles and San Francisco.

Champlin could not say whether he had a better chance with the smaller building. Developing a tower close to the beach was a "riskier location" that required "political courage," he said after Wednesday's hearing.

Up to 25 stories allowed

The state's Coastal Commission looks askance at building homes near the shoreline, Champlin said, but the commission might have welcomed a hotel under coastal policies that emphasize so-called visitor services, he said.

Champlin said the tower would have generated about \$2.2 million a year for the city, more than half from hotel bed taxes. However, opponents and council members saw the project as way out of scale for the neighborhood. While some praised the tower's sleek, modern design, they questioned what hotel guests would do in Port Hueneme after they'd walked on the local pier.

"There's no other uses to support another high-end hotel" down there, Oxnard senior planner Williamson said.

Oxnard's tower proposals, however, would stand in the northern tip of Oxnard and the heart of west Ventura County's economic engine.

To the east of Wagon Wheel is Esplanade and Topa Financial Plaza. Housing is going up at RiverPark, just north of the highway where a Whole Foods Market will open in a commercial shopping center. And the city's auto mall lies one exit east on Highway 101.

Moreover, city guidelines allow buildings up to 25 stories, and all but two of the six meet that criteria, Williamson said.

Strong public participation'

Champlin agreed that the Oxnard proposals stand better chances of approval, partly because of location. However, the vote in Port Hueneme "will send a message to both projects to anticipate strong public participation," Champlin said.

He chalked up the volatile opposition to a countywide mentality that gives ordinary citizens more voice in how communities grow.

"The public feels more empowered and emboldened to take land-use decisions into their own hands, for better or worse," he said, a reference to growth-control laws that require popular votes to approve certain developments. "We're in a climate of opposition, in general. I'm not sure there's any short-term solution."

Vince Daly, a manager with Oxnard Village's Wagon Wheel project, said he believes such laws are here to stay.

"I think we have to embrace the climate and work with community groups," said Daly of Westlake Village.

So far, no formal opposition has surfaced to either of the Oxnard tower projects. Both must undergo environmental reviews. City officials must consider whether developers can reduce any identified traffic problems, Williamson said.

On Tuesday, the Oxnard City Council will consider authorizing negotiations on the Wagon Wheel project. An environmental impact report is expected to be released sometime this summer, followed by a Planning Commission hearing. Construction would take three to five years.

Construction on the first Avion tower would take about 20 months, but it's unclear where the proposal is in the city's planning pipeline. Avion President and Chief Executive Officer Doug Austin could not be reached for this story.

Keep providing housing'

The debate over building towers also raises the question of where people will live as Ventura County grows.

Growth-control laws are designed to protect agriculture and open space, while keeping urban sprawl at bay. However, births continue to outpace deaths.

High-density towers are still a viable option, Faulconer and others said.

"Somewhere we have to absorb the natural growth rate," Faulconer said. "We have to keep providing housing, and the only way you can do that is to build up."



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