PETALUMA ARGUS COURIER

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Davidon deal good for all

BY ARGUS-COURIER STAFF

It's a rare compromise that benefits everyone and leaves no losers, but that is exactly what Petaluma is poised to get with a land deal that will also end a long-running battle over a west side housing project.

Davidon Homes, which owns 58 pristine hillside acres of land along a creek next to Helen Putnam Regional Park, originally proposed building 93 houses on the property in 2004. The development would have decimated the habitat of a threatened species of frog, wiped out views of oak-studded hills and destroyed historic red barns.

Petaluma residents rightly fought the proposal.

Davidon came back in 2017 with a plan to build 66 luxury homes. The updated proposal on a smaller footprint still would have adversely impacted the environment on the western fringe of the city.

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Now, a compromise deal has emerged that would allow up to 28 mid-range homes on the land, preserving 44 acres, including all of the frog habitat, for an extension of Helen Putnam Park. The Kelly Creek Protection Project deal with Davidon Homes will save the red barns and add beautiful hiking trails and other features to the east end of the park.

Petaluma residents, it's time to stop fighting and start celebrating.

This deal is a win for the environment, a win for park neighbors and a win for the city of Petaluma. It's even a win for the developer.

The environmental protections in this deal are ironclad, with 44 acres that will be forever preserved as park land, including the untouched Kelly Creek. Users of Helen Putnam Park will enjoy the new trails and features. The neighbors will keep their views of the park since the proposal will create smaller, one-story homes, not the larger luxury models, which will be separated from existing homes by a buffer.

Let's not discount the benefits of new homes to this city, where housing of all varieties is in short supply. Yes, Petaluma is mostly in need of affordable housing. But 28 new mid-level homes means that 28 families currently living in starter homes can now upgrade. This will free up 28 starter homes for people living in modest rental housing, which will in turn free up rental housing for people currently in affordable housing, etc.

Also, by the time the details of the development deal are worked out, Davidon will almost certainly be required to pay into the city's affordable housing fund, the traffic mitigation fund, the public art fund and provide numerous other benefits to the city of Petaluma.

Scott Ranch on the western edge of Petaluma. An environmental group and a developer struck a deal to preserve the ranch. (CRISSY PASCUAL / Petaluma Argus-Courier)

And before you shed a tear for the poor developer, Davidon will still recoup their original $7.8 million land purchase in spades. As to the 44 acres that Davidon is ceding, the developer is not just giving it away. Kelly Creek Protection Project has agreed to purchase the land for $4.1 million. The catch is, the nonprofit needs to raise the money by Sept. 1, a deadline that is fast approaching. If it raises $11 million by Dec. 1, it can buy all 58 acres and no homes would be built.

Donate at ExtendPutnamPark.org.

A final note about how this deal came to fruition. Greg Colvin and Peter Cohn, environmental and social justice lawyers and Petaluma residents, negotiated the deal with Davidon Homes. It was negotiated behind closed doors, but so are virtually all real estate transactions. Even the Brown Act, which ensures transparency for California public agencies, allows closed door discussions for real estate deals so that the public can get the best possible deal.

There will be plenty of opportunity for future public input. The revised project will need an updated environmental review, and the development will go through multiple permit hearings, which will trigger public discussion at the planning commission and city council.

This deal is a good compromise that gives all sides something they want. There are no losers in the deal. Everyone is a winner.