A development that could eventually mean as many as 140 new homes in Gallup will be allowed to proceed after protest from a handful of residents failed to sway the City Council to do otherwise.

As a result, the builder hopes to have the first few homes ready to move into by next spring or summer in what appears to be the first new housing development in Gallup since Mentmore went up in the 1990s.

The project will start with nine or 10 single family homes at the northern end of the property, said architect Ryan Stearns, who's been shepherding the plan through the city process for more than two years.

"I'm still waiting for the phone call that tells me we've done something wrong," Stearns said the morning after the approval. "It's a big relief. It allows us to start getting into the preliminary subdivision layout in the next couple of weeks."

Businessman Eiad Sulieman had about 20 acres of land he owns rezoned as a mixed use neighborhood to open the path for his proposal. The MXN zone allows all types of housing – single family, townhomes and apartments – as well as commercial uses under 3,000 square feet.

The first home to be built will be for Suleiman and may be a little grander than the homes to follow, Stearns said. That home will probably fit the $350,000 to $400,000 price range, while the first homes to sell will be two- or three-bedroom homes in the $250,000 to $300,000 price range.

Current plans call for nine or 10 homes across from Philipina Avenue, but with driveways on a new street to the south, Stearns said. Single family homes are also planned for the south side of that street, with 18 to 20 duplexes or townhomes going in on the next block to the south.

“If there is a need for more single family homes, we’re going to build more single family homes. If the duplexes and townhomes are better suited for the community we’re going to build more of those,” Stearns said.

The Planning Commission approved the zone change twice, on split votes both times. The commercial element didn’t sit well with a few residents. One couple, Bill and Jennifer Lee, filed an appeal that landed the question before the city council Sept. 13.

MXN is relatively new to Gallup and had previously only been applied to existing structures in areas where businesses and housing were already mixed.

That makes this project the canary in a citywide coalmine. If this project succeeds, Suleiman might be interested in buying more property to build more homes. That’s no comfort to Bill.

“There are large pieces of property in the Indian Hills, Mentmore, Mossman area,” Bill said. “Those landowners have asked me, ‘If this goes through, can we rezone ours to mixed use so that we can start to put businesses in there because we can’t get anybody to come in and to build homes?’”

The one thing everybody could agree on is that Gallup desperately needs more housing.

When the city declared a housing emergency in May, there were 17 listings priced from $64,000 to $520,000 on the market in Gallup, Valentine said. As of Sept. 10, there were just 13 houses, priced between $100,000 and $329,000, on the market.

“As you can see, the situation is not getting better,” Valentine said. “The longer we continue to wait, the more prices go up and the more inflation goes up, the more unattainable the single family unit becomes.”

With that as the starting point, four councilors (Mayor Louie Bonaguidi was absent) debated whether to affirm the new zoning or overturn it, which might have delayed or even killed the project.

Suleiman’s property sits south of Philipina Avenue and east of Strong Drive, adjacent to existing homes to the north and east. Some neighbors were afraid that businesses would start randomly popping up among homes, or that apartments would change the character of the neighborhood and might be allowed to deteriorate.

“I think there are some misconceptions about what we are proposing to build,” Stearns told the council. “We have no intent to build commercial space. We’re going to subdivide this thing. If someone wants to come and buy two lots, we can’t prevent what they build on that. But we have no plan to build any commercial.”

Suleiman sought the MXN zoning because it’s the only option with the flexibility for all types of housing. Even apartments are a last resort to be built only if single family housing doesn’t sell.

“Apartments are really more of a last resort. We don’t want to do them because we don’t want to manage them. We want to sell properties,” Stearns said.

Councilor Michael Schaaf, Dist. 2, was concerned about subsequent owners opening businesses.

“I have problems with the mixed use because they could put commercial in there once we approve it,” he said. “Or if the property is sold, the next person could put commercial in.”

Planning Director C.B. Strain said that would be difficult after subdividing.

“If they are going to go to the expense of subdividing it … that means they have to plat the lots, they have to run all the infrastructure – water sewer, electric, paved streets, all of that. Once you do all of that, it would be very difficult to retrofit commercial uses in there [because] the lot sizes wouldn’t allow it,” he told the council. “Once that is set and you have all that money invested in it, it’s kind of hard to go back.”

Testifying in support of the project, Valentine noted that transients use the vacant property now, contributing to petty crime in the neighborhood.

Councilor Sarah Piano, Dist. 4, favors the housing but was also concerned about commercial. The property is in her district, so she’d be most likely to field constituent complaints as the project progresses. She voted for the project.

“We can’t jump ahead of ourselves and say ‘Let’s not do this because all these other things might happen.’ We’re living in a lot of what-ifs in this moment and that makes me nervous,” Piano said.

She also said she would be interested in adding a zone to the Land Standards that would allow all types of housing without commercial for future projects.

“The big concern is commercial,” she said. “We are kind of living in the future of ‘what if.’ It’s hard to live in that place because nothing ever gets done.”

Councilor Fran Palochak, Dist. 4, was on board with few reservations.

“I’ve gone to many communities where you go and stop at your dental office or doctor’s office and it’s right there in a residential area. It’s not hurting anybody to be there. It’s nice,” Palochak said. “Even if you have a convenience store, that’s not a bad thing. It means your people don’t have to go all the way dowtown. [... A] lot of people like that.”

Her main concern was preserving the aesthetic quality of the neighborhood. “The homes in that area are beautiful,” she said. “We want to keep the neighborhood aesthetically beautiful. Can the city hold their feet to the fire?”

Strain and Stearns noted that the design phase will have to go to public hearings before the Planning Commission to ensure the homes meet design and quality standards.

Schaaf wasn’t convinced, and was ultimately the only vote against the MXN zoning. The council affirmed it on a 3-1 vote.

Bill said he’s prepared to live with the council’s decision.

“I am going to quietly support this housing project. I want to see homes built,” Bill said. “But I hope that they stick to what they have said and the land somewhere down the way doesn’t get sold because costs get high or this didn’t happen or this fell through or it became difficult.”

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