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Residential development proposed for historic Kenneth Smith property

Shawnee Planning Commission gives OK to rezoning, preliminary plat



Photo by Sara Shepherd. Enlarge photo.

File photo. Shawnee City Hall is located at 11110 Johnson Drive.

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Nestled in the heart of Shawnee, amidst rolling terrain and ponds and extensive foliage, is a historic spot that put the city on the map for decades.

Sitting on the south side of 71st street, between Quivira and Pflumm roads, the former Kenneth Smith Golf Club manufacturing facility produced golf clubs from 1936 to 2003, earning fame because the clubs were not mass produced; each set was unique, made to each client's specifications.

Those clients included the rich and famous -- Bob Hope, Sammy Davis Jr. and Mickey Mantle, as well as presidents like Lyndon B. Johnson and Dwight D. Eisenhower and royalty like the King of Morocco, Hassan II.

Now, the vacant landscape which once housed that popular golf club manufacturing facility may be the site for future single family homes.

Developers with The Alpert Companies, LP, plans to develop 92 single family residential lots in the lush former golf course setting, which will provide the opportunity for maintenance-provided villas in a variety of types, sizes and styles.

At its meeting on July 16, the Shawnee Planning Commission unanimously gave the development team its first green light by approving rezoning of the 60-acre site to planned single family and also approving its preliminary plat.

The commission gave stipulations, however, that the developers should give another look at stormwater measures and traffic calming efforts to address nearby homeowners' concerns.

At the meeting, the commission and public were offered an in-depth glimpse into the developers' plans for the beloved Shawnee site.

About the plan

The proposed residential development, to be titled Kenneth Estates, will feature architecture styles typically found in newer Johnson County neighborhoods, including expressions of country English, country French and native prairie styles.

Access to the development will be provided from 71st Street at Richards Drive, Bradshaw Street, and also Westgate Street.

Richards Drive will extend from 71st Street south to connect into the existing 74th Street stub in the Fairway Hills subdivision, completing its street network.

Approximately one-third of the site, primarily the southern portion, will be preserved as open space, resulting in enhanced privacy for many of the residences.

To preserve the site's historic value, the developers plan to retain and renovate the uninhabited Kenneth Smith home on the property.

"It needs a lot of work, but it has beautiful character and we really want to see it preserved and hopefully find a family who can move into and enjoy it," said Jeff Alpert, a principal with The Alpert Companies.

He told the commission his team appreciates the land's historic nature and natural beauty, so preserving those qualities were of utmost importance.

The developers propose to preserve 20 acres of previously undisturbed forested area, including the existing east and center ponds.

Walking paths will be installed to connect the ponds to each other as well as the surrounding residential streets to provide access for all Kenneth Estates residents.

The site does not come without its challenges, however.

Because of the manufacturing nature of the site, there are residual environmental issues to be addressed and mitigated.

Alpert confirmed to the commission his team intends to remove all structures relating to the golf club manufacturing activity and dispose of environmentally undesirable materials in an approved and safe manner.

In addition, there are residual chemicals relating to the maintenance of the golf course tees and greens in contaminated soils which will also be removed from the site, which will be performed under the jurisdiction of the Kansas Department of Health and Environment.

At their meeting last week, several of the commissioners expressed their admiration for the project, which they believe will be a good fit for the site.

But many residents in attendance vocalized their concerns during the public hearing.

Neighbors weigh in

Most residents who spoke at the meeting were specifically worried about stormwater complications stemming from the project and a potential increase in traffic for surrounding neighborhoods.

Some also expressed unease towards 74th Street, a current dead end, becoming a through roadway.

Shawnee resident Mike Schmitz told the commission he is concerned about an increase in traffic the connection could bring to 74th Street through the Fairway Hills subdivision.

He hopes the developer will install traffic calming measures on the street to ensure cars slow down in an area where many children play and walk to school.

Fairway Hills homeowner Wanda Stipek agreed.

While she thinks the developers' ideas are great and she appreciates their measures to preserve the area, she worries a 74th Street connection will negatively impact young children walking home from nearby Good Shepherd Catholic School.

"As they enter Fairway Hills, they never have to cross any through streets," she said. "That's one of the reasons why this neighborhood is so welcoming and feels like a small town. It's one of the reasons we appreciate living here in Shawnee, because it feels safe."

She also worries drivers on 71st Street may start using the 74th Street connection as a shortcut to Good Shepherd or Blackfish Parkway.

Fairway Hills homeowners Jimmy Snead and Gene Russell both separately told the commission they worry the density of the project will have a negative stormwater impact on surrounding neighborhoods.

Russell further said he had hoped the commission would hold off on voting for the the project's rezoning until residents' questions and concerns were properly addressed.

The commission, however, felt a continuation was unnecessary, and it voted unanimously in favor of the rezoning change and preliminary plat.

Behind their vote

A few commissioners offered reasoning behind their approval.

Commissioner Alan Willoughby pointed out that the developers intend 40 percent the development to be left to nature and their studies show the stormwater runoff from the development will be 10 percent less than it is currently.

Commissioner Kathy Peterson told residents she understands their concerns, but she sees the proposed Kenneth Estates as a good plan.

She also reminded them the project was still in the preliminary stage, so changes could be made later on.

"This is a sketch; we don't have the final look just yet," she said. "I really like the effort these developers have put in. It's never easy but this is a very good start to a final product I think Shawnee can be proud of at some point in time."

After the meeting, Commissioner Les Smith, who lives in Fairway Hills, offered his two cents directly to the Dispatch.

He addressed two primary concerns raised by residents regarding the site plan: storm drainage and the connection of 74th Street to Richards Drive.

As a commissioner, he expects city staff and the developer to address all the stormwater issues raised by residents to ensure the project doesn't cause flooding issues in Fairway Hills and beyond.

"One thing I hope folks will remember is that this is a preliminary plat, which means a lot of research, calculating, and design work still needs to be done before it's presented in final form," he said. "It was important to receive input on storm drainage issues from residents, such as Mr. Snead, because they offer real-life experience, but it's impossible for anyone to give specific answers at this point."

Smith admitted the 74th Street connection was a tough decision for him because he lives on the street.

"With all due respect to my neighbors, and I don't mean to be insensitive, the bottom line is that each of us bought a house on a street with a barricade at the end and vacant property on the other side," he said. "Not a cul-de-sac, mind you, but a barricaded street with a temporary turnaround off to one side. Those of us who bought within the last few years had a responsibility to do our own due diligence before buying. I feel badly for anyone who didn't do their homework, but I don't think the commission should be asked to fix that."

He believes his neighbors brought up legitimate safety issues regarding traffic and speed. He told the Dispatch he is pleased the planning commission was able to get a commitment from the developer to install a traffic calming device to slow residential traffic into Fairway Hills.

"I believe strongly in this requirement and will do everything possible to make it happen," he said.

At the end of the day, Smith had to trust his instinct, which was the belief the plan was a good one.

"It needs some tweaking, but I believe the developer will respond in a positive manner to the requests of residents," he said. "It addresses a need in Shawnee for a maintenance-provided community on smaller lots without being something more of a high-density patio home project."

Now that the planning commission has green-lighted the rezoning and preliminary plat, both items will go before the city council for consideration at a later date.

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