

As Visalia city fees drop, subdivisions rise

Written by

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11:00 PM, Feb. 23, 2011 |

Local builders see a glimmer of hope that Visalia's housing market can finally restart after years in the doldrums.

The optimism stems from reduced builders' fees, the benefits of a county tax for road improvements and a sign ordinance to help builders promote their developments. It's lowered fees and self-assessed taxes that have made a difference for McMillin Homes and other builders in Visalia.

"Right now, we're paying up to \$7,500 per [single-family] home in transportation-impact fees to build in Bakersfield," said Carrie Williams, vice president of marketing for McMillan. "It's a lot less in Visalia, and that gives us a fighting chance here."

In fact, Visalia grudgingly reduced its transportation impact fee from \$4,803 in 2009-10 to \$4,072 in 2010-11 — further encouraging developers to go ahead with long-planned developments.

The effort is part of Visalia's local stimulus package, spearheaded by Mayor Bob Link,

who considers the local building industry to be the foundation of the local economy. Ricardo Noguera, director of housing and economic development for Visalia, believes in the effort.

"When people buy homes, they buy other things," Noguera said. "There's a ripple effect."

'Ripple effect'

The expanded theory holds that if the new-home market can be jump-started, the momentum generated might also lift Visalia's existing-home sales and, eventually, stem the tide of foreclosures.

Stephen Peck is vice president for The Mangano Company, which has also benefited from lower commercial building fees to get the sophisticated Main Street Promenade off the ground and under construction downtown.

Visalia's more lenient fees structure has

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helped The Mangano Company tremendously, Peck said. Though not involved in residential building, Peck said he's not surprised that McMillin is able to get at least one of its subdivisions off the drawing board and onto the ground.

"Certainly, a \$700 drop in [transportation impact] fees wouldn't in and of itself provide the impetus to start building," Peck said. However, Measure R, a Tulare County half-cent tax in place since 2006, has provided millions for road infrastructure, taking pressure off developers.

"In Kern County [Bakersfield], builders likely have to pay both city and county impact fees, and we don't have to do that here," Peck said. "It makes a tremendous difference."

More and better signs

More than a year ago, the Visalia City Council implemented a more lenient signs ordinance that McMillin has made the most use of in promoting this latest development.

"We can respect the need for reasonable signs," Williams said, "but we also need to properly promote our homes to buyers."

Off-site signs had been, until last week, prohibited under a restrictive city ordinance that permitted only 12-foot-tall kiosks with slots that allowed developers, for a fee, to slide in small directional signs.

However, the Visalia City Council almost universally soured on the kiosk idea and

has formally ended the experiment. Last week, the city found a way to distance itself from the outside kiosk contract and start to take the kiosks down. Any new kiosks will be considered nonconforming to Visalia's guidelines and be removed as well.

In exchange, developers are now permitted more and larger signs off-site.

Art show How to attend

An example of the renewed attitude is today's grand opening of a new McMillin Homes subdivision in northwest Visalia — an event that includes some astonishing artwork from the local Arts Consortium. "We're very happy to be included," said Aaron Collins, a member of the consortium who helped set up an assortment of paintings and ceramic creations Tuesday. "Most of our display is going to be in a loft area in one of the model homes."

Collins said McMillin made a modest contribution to the consortium in appreciation for the efforts. "It's all about the community, and the way things are now, we're going to see a lot more of this outreach," said Carrie Williams, vice president of marketing for McMillin, from the company's Bakersfield office.

McMillin's grand opening for one of its latest subdivisions in northwest Visalia is 5:30-7:30 p.m. today at 2734 N. Boise St., Visalia, near Riggan Avenue. The event includes an art show, catering,

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