

Spotlight on: Sunland

Tujunga Wash Development Splits Valley

Economic Slump Continues After Golf Course Project Is Denied

By PAT KRAMER
Contributing Reporter

LOCATED on the scenic northern frontier of Los Angeles between the Angeles National Forest and Verdugo Hills, Sunland is a community divided by issues — issues that, lately, have pitted business owners against environmentalists and neighbors against neighbors.

The big issue is commercial development, and it takes on significance in a place that takes much pride in its clean air and open spaces — but is also in the midst of an economic slump.

On July 22, on a 10-4 vote, the Los Angeles City Council voted against granting a conditional land use permit to **Foothill Golf Development Group LLC** to build a golf and equestrian facility in the rustic Tujunga Wash. The proposal consisted of an 18-hole public golf course, equestrian trails and a nature preserve on 352 acres of land.

The Sunland-Tujunga Chamber of Commerce, led by then-President Kathy Anthony, had lobbied hard for the golf course. But various environmental studies found that it would have resulted in significant, adverse impacts, including the destruction of a large portion of a rare ecosystem, a threat to several endangered animals and plants, potential pollution downriver and the contamination of groundwater.

The project also called for a great deal of gravel and earth fill, which would have to be placed in the midst of a flood plain — possibly endangering residents and the environment in the event of a flood.

Although Councilman Joel Wachs, whose district includes the area, voted for the project, it was opposed by many community and environmental groups, including the Shadow Hills Property Owners Association, the California Department of Fish and Game, the Sierra Club and Small Wilderness Area Preservation.

It was also opposed by the hotel/restaurant employees union, which remains embroiled in a dispute with **Kajima Corp.**, a lien-holder on the land proposed for the development, over a labor issue at the New Otani Hotel in downtown L.A. (which Kajima owns).

The failed development has stirred up a good deal of hostility among the town's business leaders, who had banked their hopes for economic recovery on the golf course.

"If we had gotten the golf course in, it would have been our front yard and it would have been beautiful," said Anthony. "Economically and environmentally, it was the best thing

that could have happened to our community."

As a result of the vote, the developer and land owner have filed a joint suit against the city asking for \$215 million in damages. Andrew Baldonado, spokesman for Foothill Golf, said the vote resulted from issues unrelated to the land use process and runs counter to the unanimous support for the project from the city Planning and Land Use Management Committee and the Planning Commission.

Some Sunland business leaders also blame organized labor for the defeat, saying that the City Council kowtowed to pressure from the hotel/restaurant employees. But the opponents of the project disagree.

"Had this been a situation where the labor unions were the only issue, the project would have been approved in a heartbeat," said attorney Bill Eick, who represents the Shadow Hills Property Owners Association and Small Wilderness Area Preservation.

The raw feelings between the chamber and the environmentalists over Tujunga Wash came to a head at a recent community-wide cleanup of the area. Sponsored by Friends of the L.A. River, 40 people participated in the cleanup — while another 20 protested the event, holding signs that read, "You're here now, but where will you be a year from now?"

Many consider it a reasonable question, because Sunland is going through some tough times. Half the storefronts along the 1.5-mile stretch of Foothill Boulevard that comprise the retail district are vacant.

It is a place where fast-food franchises dominate the landscape, surrounded by fledgling mom-and-pop stores that are struggling to survive. To those seeking to lure commercial business to town, the golf course development — despite its potential liabilities — represented an important opportunity.

The economic downturn started in the early '90s when **Lockheed Martin Corp.** began transferring workers out of its Skunk Works facility in Burbank. Sunland had been something of a bedroom community for Lockheed workers, and when the plant closed, many left town.

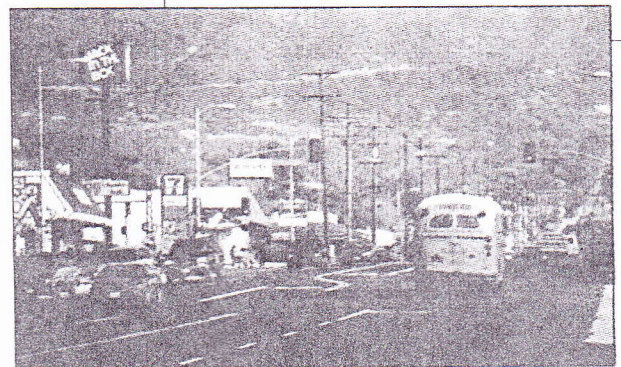
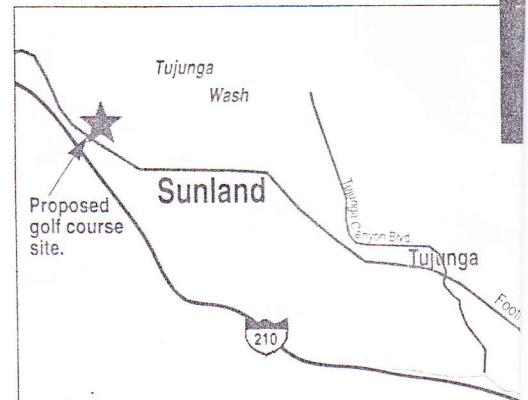
No major industry has arisen to replace Lockheed. Businessman Herb Rostand of **Rostand Jewelers** says he has noticed a definite deterioration over the past 10 years.

"Sunland used to be like a small Midwest-

ern town," Rostand said. "We had a department store or two, a yard goods shop, a couple of doctors, ladies' and men's shops, gift shops, a bakery and restaurants. Now it's a far cry from what it was when I first came here 37 years ago."

Sealed off by mountains on the north and south and approachable only from the east and west, Sunland remains unknown to many in L.A. — and many of its residents like it that way.

Originally settled in 1885 as the "health



community" of Monte Vista, according to records at Bolton Hall Museum in nearby Tujunga, it has always attracted people for the quality of its scenery and the clean air that sweeps down the mountains.

As a result, it became known as a mountain retreat for affluent L.A. residents who came there for privacy and health reasons. Located just 20 miles north of Los Angeles, its 11.2 square miles were home to 14,081 people in 1990, according to the U.S. Census.

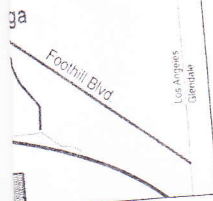
Sunland has the third-lowest population density in L.A., with 4.1 residents per gross acre compared to a city average of 11.6 residents per gross acre.

Demographically, Sunland is 63 percent white, 25 percent Latino, 5 percent Asian and 7 percent black. Average income is \$40,387.

Community



Uncertain future: Sunland's retail district (below) is half empty, with the other half dominated by struggling mom-and-pop stores and fast-food outlets. Some had hoped the golf course project would turn the area around.



Anthony says the remaining small, mom-and-pop businesses make Sunland a friendlier place to do business.

"I bet I know 95 percent of the business people by their first names. We care about our neighbors. Police here are friendly. How many places do you know where you can wave at a police officer and they wave back?"

However, she also realizes that the business district is slowly dying. "Every time a business closes, it's like putting a knife in you," she said.

Current Chamber of Commerce President Barbara Hughes blames the problems on the city government.

"It has taken 18 years for us to get Foothill Boulevard paved. We've had problems with zoning, all kinds of problems. We've been fighting tooth and nail to get things done up here. They (city officials) say they don't have the money."

Hughes' goal is to make Sunland a more business-friendly community. And that starts, she said, by changing the attitudes of residents.

"This negativity is killing the community. One of the main things we need is for people to have a better attitude and more of a working relationship within the community, and to start expressing positive things about the community."

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