

Spotlight on Agoura Hills

Developers Invited, But Sticking to Rules Is a Must

By PAT KRAMER
Contributing Reporter

AFFLUENT and park-like, Agoura Hills has always guarded its reputation as a bucolic suburban community at the gateway to the Santa Monica Mountains Recreation Area. The city has set up a labyrinth of rules for development, including as well as commercial projects.

So it isn't surprising that as Agoura Hills prepares for the development of a 100-acre commercially zoned area on the north side of the 101 Freeway, it is making no apologies for the way it wants the development handled.

"It's an upscale, semi-rural, young community," notes Chamber of Commerce President Steve Morrow.

The city does not collect business taxes, but "Anybody who approaches the city (with plans to develop) has to comport with the general plan to ensure that all the specifications are met to maintain the city's general character," he added.

The city is currently home to about 800 businesses, and the site currently under discussion for development is slated for office, rather than retail use. Agoura Hills' current retail centers are geared strictly for use by the community — there is little to draw visitors from outlying areas.

Two major shopping centers of about 100,000 square feet are each anchored by a supermarket and house video rental stores, dry cleaners, pharmacies and other shops that serve the day-to-day needs of the community.

South of the freeway, the only other area master planned for business park use, there are several centers of about 75,000 square feet each, with office space taken by real estate, accounting and medical offices and restaurants to service the workers there.

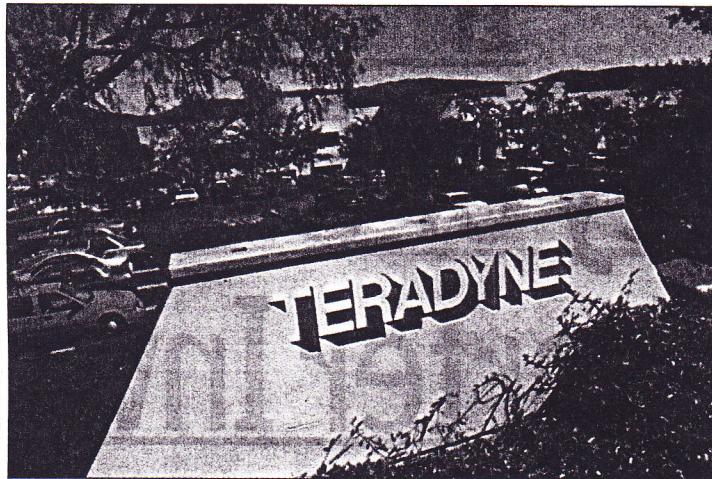
Even the local movie theater seems a community-only affair, an eight-screen Mann theater housed in the 60,000-square-foot Agoura Hills Cinema Center.

"I recently attended an Agoura Hills economic development committee meeting and was surprised at the number of codes and building requirements people have to abide by when they build in Agoura," said Morrow. "The community has a plan, a vision, of how things should look to maintain a certain characteristic. If you want to do business here because of what a nice community it is, you must abide by the codes and other covenants that are required."

Originally settled by the Chumash Indians, Agoura was home to prospectors and homesteaders in the mid-1800s. In 1901, legendary resident George Lewis built a ranch on 500 acres of land which, in 1924, was purchased and subdivided by the enterprising Colodny Brothers as "Independence Acres." Paramount Studios purchased the land in 1928 to use as the backdrop for many of its Westerns, renaming it "Picture City." (The land is now part of the Santa Monica Mountains National Recreation Area.) Soon after, area businessmen began lobbying for a post office branch, and the area was named "Agoura," in reference to the successful turn-of-the-century sheep rancher Pierre Agoure.

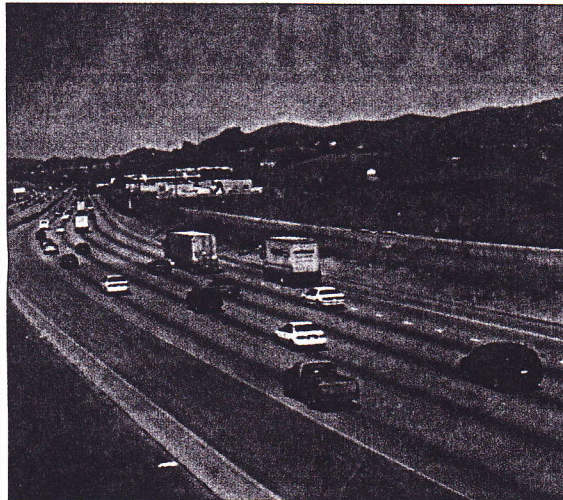
In 1982, the city incorporated in response to what Senior Planner Mike Kamino calls a move to gain local control over development. "The residents in this city came here, live here, mainly because of the quality of life this area has to offer. Not just in terms of the good schools, air quality and low crime rate but in the low-density style of development that exists here. These are things people in this area cherish."

Agoura Hills is home to about 21,400 res-



PHOTOS BY TODD FRANKEL / SFVBU

Worth the trouble: Companies like Teradyne stick by Agoura Hills.



idents, according to the state Department of Finance's 1997 figures. Median family income was \$84,188 in 1990 while median home values were listed at \$368,000.

The city collects no business taxes. But it puts many restrictions on development.

To safeguard their housing tracts, several residential homeowners associations have their own conditions, covenants and restrictions. One of the oldest residential associations in the city, Old Agoura Homeowners Association, is an equestrian community with about 400 families.

Key to the city's general plan is the restriction against building on the hillsides or ridgelines that virtually surround the city.

"The hillsides really add to the character of the community," says Kamino, who notes that many of the residential areas depend upon them for privacy and for a view. There's also a 35-foot height limitation for all buildings in the city as well, as a provision protecting the city's oak trees.

The city is now residentially "built out," City Manager Dave Adams noted.

"We have pretty tight ordinances limiting building on the hills, but there is still a lot of development potential along the freeway," he said.

Kamino said the general tendency is to favor office development over retail in an effort to cut down on traffic and noise to residential areas.

In characteristic fashion, the City Council

and Planning Commission have held numerous discussions and workshops to get input from all the concerned parties for the proposed development plan. The result of those discussions will be reviewed at a May 13 City Council meeting.

Adams lists the area's top employers as the Litton Data Systems Division, **Teradyne Inc.** and **J.D. Powers & Associates**. Teradyne, the manufacturer of automated testing equipment used by the electronics industry, recently expanded its operations by purchasing two buildings over 100,000 square feet in Agoura Hills and Westlake Village.

Teradyne spokesman Tom Newman says the company, which presently employs 6,500 technical workers, plans to double its manufacturing operations in Agoura Hills, making it the company's sixth-largest manufacturing operation worldwide.

Newman said Agoura was attractive for several reasons, "the first being we're already there and have been for a number of years, and we've had good luck in recruiting and retaining technical people who make our operation work."

While he acknowledged the difficulty in developing in the area, Newman said the restrictions and regulations are not all that different from many other communities. "Expansions nowadays are not easy anywhere. People care about what's happening in their own backyards," he said.



Agoura Hills

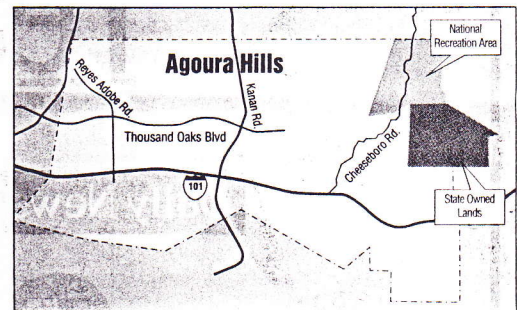
Year Founded: 1901

Origins: Originally settled by the Chumash Indians, who were joined by homesteaders and prospectors in the mid-1800s.

Current Population: 21,400

Business Profile: Corporate/regional headquarters for three major corporations: Litton Industries, Teradyne and J.D. Powers & Associates.

Point of Interest: Santa Monica Mountains National Recreation Area



And there are signs that Agoura Hills is mellowing in its attitudes. Chamber President Morrow likens it to a balancing act: "You want to be supportive of the city but because we are business advocates, we are probably more aggressive in how we view the city's development needs. Over the past several years, the chamber and the city have been working more closely, being in unison with what economic development should be in Agoura. And while we want development, we also want to protect those assets which make economic development in Agoura so attractive."

The Old Agoura Homeowners Association is a voluntary organization that encourages diversity in residences (with a preference for a ranch style design and muted colors).

But other residential developments also maintain a strict code. There are mandatory rules at Morrison Ranch Estates, one of the newer residential developments in the city. Lot setbacks, house colors and roofing materials all are clearly defined with white stucco and Spanish tile roofs, the designated design.

The rules, say residents, are designed to protect the open space-feel of the community. "There's a lot of open space," says Jess Thomas, president of the Old Agoura Homeowners Association. "If you stand in the middle of town and you make a circle and turn around, you can see open ridge lines surrounding the city, particularly as you look toward Ladyface Mountain."