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Economic slowdown puts Rubidoux community development project on hold

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10:00 PM PST on Tuesday, November 25, 2008

By **SANDRA STOKLEY**
The Press-Enterprise

RUBIDOUX - The thoroughbreds that pranced on the lush lawns at Emerald Meadows Ranch are long gone and their stables pulled down.

The modest homes that were snapped up like hot cakes are all gone, too.

And the small industrial park on Rubidoux Boulevard that was at the center of a tug-of-war between a 73-year-old widow and Riverside County's Redevelopment Agency has been bulldozed.

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But the 278 acres where the ambitious Emerald Meadows master-planned community was to rise remain ungraded and weed-choked, a testament to the country's economic malaise.

"It's on hold," Las Vegas developer Jim Stockhausen said recently. "I'm not sure when it's going to get going."

The development, unveiled in 2004, called for a shopping center anchored by a Home Depot, hundreds of homes and apartments, church, school and parks. A walking/jogging trail was planned to meander through the project.

The land included the 150-acre thoroughbred-training facility that gave the project its name.

It was to be built on property in the heart of Rubidoux and was viewed by some as one of the linchpins of the county's efforts to improve the fortunes of this hardscrabble unincorporated community in northwestern Riverside County.

But along the way to that grand vision, the economy went south and took Emerald Meadows Ranch with it.

Stockhausen and his partner, Mitchell Ogron, sold the residential portion of the project to SunCal Cos. in July 2007. SunCal is now charged with putting in roads, water and sewer lines and other infrastructure.

"We're waiting on them and they are waiting on financing," Stockhausen said.

SunCal's financing came from Lehman Brothers, and when the banking giant declared bankruptcy in September, everything screeched to a halt.

"Due to the current housing market and economic conditions, it has been necessary to adjust our development timelines for this project," SunCal spokesman Joe Aguirre said recently.

"There is no work currently taking place, and we do not have an estimate of when it will resume," he said.

All of which leaves Jurupa Hills resident Pauline Burnett, whose property was seized against her will, depressed and frustrated.

"They got the property. They tore the buildings down. And now there's nothing there," Burnett said. "I try not to go by there because it makes me so sad."

Burnett, now 75, owned the American Plaza, an industrial complex on a 1.02-acre property adjacent to Highway 60 that was considered crucial to the project.

Burnett and her late husband, Lynn, had purchased the property with their savings and constructed the buildings.

While most other property owners sold willingly and moved away, Burnett resisted.

When a deal with Burnett proved elusive, Riverside County's Redevelopment Agency, which had agreed to acquire properties for Stockhausen and Ogron, filed eminent domain proceedings and took Burnett to court.

She ultimately received \$1.7 million in a settlement with Riverside County's Redevelopment Agency that was finalized this fall. But Burnett insists that is not the point.

"Not only was this something I didn't ask for. It was something my husband and I had dreamed about," Burnett said.

Burnett said the rental income from the property helped support her retirement. When the time came, the property was to be her legacy to her children.

The Jurupa Area Recreation and Park District stood to gain 17.5 acres of parks, open space and walking trails

if the project had moved forward as planned.

Those plans included two small neighborhood parks and an 8-acre site with ball fields, picnic facilities and a playground, said park district general manager Dan Rodriguez.

Rodriguez said he last met with the project's landscape architect more than a year ago.

"They are at a standstill, just like other developments," he said.

Reach Sandra Stokley at 951-368-9647 or sstokley@PE.com
