

Laguna Woods Facing Its First Big-City Decision

March 31, 1999 JASON LEOPOLD and PHIL WILLON SPECIAL TO THE TIMES

Before members of the Laguna Woods City Council even pick out stationery they may be voting on a mammoth 140-room hotel and business complex proposed for the middle of Orange County's newest city.

Debate over the \$25-million, 14-acre complex will give leaders of the tiny municipality a crash course in big-city decision-making only weeks after residents of the gated retirement village Leisure World voted to incorporate.

One member of the new council, easily adopting the patented bureaucratic lingo of a city hall veteran, said the project isn't expected to be controversial. "It will clearly add to our revenue stream," said Councilman Bert Hack.

Hack said Laguna Woods may pocket more than six figures in annual tax revenue from the development. But, on the other hand, the complex may bring headaches like increased traffic and a parking crunch.

The venture is being proposed by Costa Mesa development company Burnett Polygon L.P., which plans to build its El Toro Business Centre on a parcel it owns on El Toro Road near Moulton Parkway, a mile from the San Diego Freeway. The project lies in a small commercial area of the city that is outside the gates of Leisure World.

Along with the hotel, the project would include a three-story, 68,000-square-foot office building, a two-story, 45,000-square-foot office building, a three-story medical office building, two retail buildings totaling 12,000 square feet and a restaurant.

"We just saw a need in this part of South County" said Lynn Burnett, chief executive of Burnett Polygon. "This project is located at the geographic center of Leisure World, and there's a lot of opportunity here."

Hack said the project is a "definite priority," but for now the newly elected council is concentrating on learning how to run a city. Council members won't have an opportunity to vote on the project for at least a month, he said.

"We still have to decide what day we should hold our meetings," he said.

The county is acting as the city's planning department until a staff is hired by the new city. The county will write all the reports related to the business center and will inform the council of the project status, Hack said.

"Ultimately, we will have the final vote," he said.

Kevin Clarke, the developer's project director, said he is not worried about the new council's inexperience and thinks the project will be approved.

"We have to get the county comfortable with the plan first," he said. "We're trying to keep the county from slowing things down because the city is still putting itself together."

Burnett said he hopes to start construction on the Laguna Woods project later this year, and expects it will take about a year to complete.