

# Santolina development takes another step forward

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ALBUQUERQUE, N.M. — The Bernalillo County Commission approved Santolina’s first Level B Master Plan on Wednesday, bringing the massive 21-square-mile development southwest of Interstate 40 and 118th Street one step closer to fruition.

“This plan provides a solid foundation for the future,” said James Strozier of Consensus Planning, who presented the plan on behalf of the developer.

Leading the charge to move the project forward was Commissioner Wayne Johnson, who joined with fellow Republican Lonnie Talbert and Democrat Steven Michael Quezada in voting for the Level B plan. Commission Chairwoman Debbie O’Malley and Maggie Hart Stebbins, both Democrats, voted against it.

While the Level A Master Plan approved in 2015 provides a broad overview of the entire development, the Level B plan just approved offers more specificity, although it covers only about a third of the Santolina property. Additional Level B plans will likely be submitted in the future for other segments of the development.

The Level B plan approved covers about 4,200 acres on the northwest and northeast portions of the Santolina property. It is generally bounded by Interstate 40 to the north, 118th Street and the escarpment open space to the east, Dennis Chavez Boulevard on the south and the escarpment area adjacent to the Rio Puerco Valley on the west.

The plan envisions a maximum of 9,444 households on that portion of the property.

The plan includes a 493-acre mixed-use commercial and town center, a 176-acre business park, a residential area totaling 1,276 acres and a 671-acre industrial park. The plan also calls for 842 acres of open space and parks, which is more than 20 percent of the area covered by the Level B plan.

The County Planning Commission and county staff had recommended approval, although opponents of the project appealed the planning commission’s decision. That appeal was denied on the same 3-2 vote.

Jaimie Park, an attorney with the New Mexico Environmental Law Center, who argued on behalf of SouthWest Organizing Project and other Santolina opponents, said the developer had failed to provide critical information to determine whether the development would truly result in no net expense to the county, which is one of the conditions. Strozier countered that the no net expense requirement had been addressed by both county staff and an outside firm hired by the county.

The master developer, Western Albuquerque Land Holdings, and the county must now hammer out a Level B development agreement for the project. The developer will then have to negotiate an agreement with the Albuquerque Bernalillo County Water Utility Authority before moving forward with the county’s permitting and subdivision process.

More than a dozen people addressed the commission on the Level B plan prior to the vote.

“Our economy is stale. Unless we grow, we will die as a community,” said John Garcia, executive vice president of the Home Builders Association of Central New Mexico. “... Planned growth makes sense. No planned growth is bad growth.”

But Paula Garcia, executive director of the New Mexico Acequia Association, said her organization opposes the Level B plan because the developer has not demonstrated that there's sufficient water for the development.

"We're not opposed to growth, and we're certainly not opposed to planning," she said. "But there is an elephant in room not being discussed and that is water."

At full build-out in about 50 years, the Santolina development could be home to 90,000 people, which is about the size of Rio Rancho.