

More distribution centers proposed for Moreno Valley's eastern side

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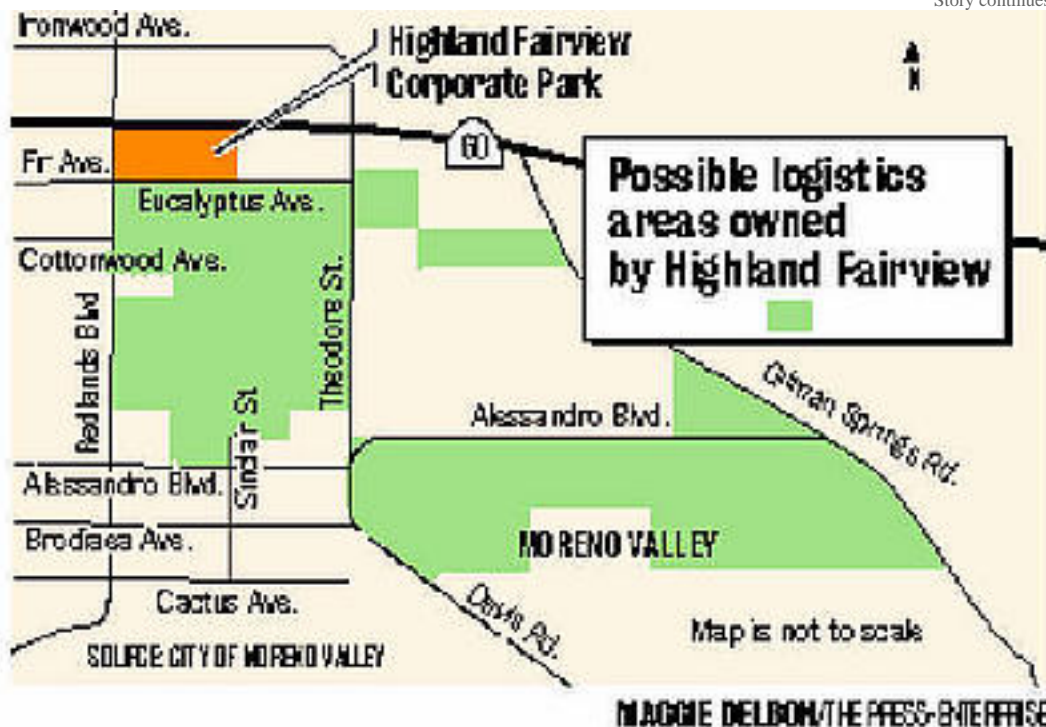
By DAN LEE
The Press-Enterprise

MORENO VALLEY - Highland Fairview Properties, the developer of the Aquabella residential project and the Skechers logistics facility, is considering plans to build as much as 35 million square feet in distribution centers on the eastern side of town.

That potential scenario was included in the draft environmental impact report that the Michael Brandman Associates consulting firm prepared for the Skechers project. It would affect about 1,800 acres south of Highway 60 and between Redlands Boulevard and Gilman Springs Road, reducing the number of homes allowable in the Specific Plan in the area and increasing the land devoted to industrial uses.

Although the 1.8 million-square-foot Skechers building is a separate project, Highland Fairview President Iddo Benzeevi said the scenario was included in the report because residents had asked what might happen if that area, known as the Moreno Highlands, was developed into a business park. Highland Fairview has not formally submitted any proposal for logistic centers in the Moreno Highlands area.

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"It is an alternative that will be evaluated," Benzeevi said by phone. "We're looking at every possibility."

Any such proposal would require revising the Moreno Highlands Specific Plan, which would require the city Planning Commission and the City Council to hold public hearings prior to approval, city Planning Official John Terrell said by phone.

Jobs

The City Council had approved the Moreno Highlands plan in 1992. The 3,000-acre, master-planned community would include 7,700 homes, a 600-acre business park, schools, golf courses and 120 acres of city parks. It would add as many as 30,000 new residents to Moreno Valley and 21,000 jobs, according to city estimates at the time.

Environmental activists sued the city over the plan, claiming that traffic, air pollution and potential earthquake hazards were not adequately addressed. They also argued that the planned community threatened the nearby San Jacinto Wildlife Area.

Although the projects' developers decided not to shelve their construction plans in June 1993, citing the economic downturn at that time, a judge in May 1994 ruled that the city had approved the Moreno Highlands plan properly. The Moreno Highlands community remains unbuilt.

Benzeevi said it is critical that Moreno Valley develop more of an employment base: Only about 3 percent of Moreno Valley's land can generate jobs, compared with the 10-20 percent in most cities. Without sufficient local jobs, residents are forced to commute out of town for work, creating traffic and causing them to have less time with their families, he said.

"It is just not acceptable," Benzeevi said. "We need to build sustainable communities."

A big part of the original Highlands plan already was intended for industrial uses, the developer added. With the addition of distribution centers the Moreno Highlands area could generate more than 26,700 jobs, according to Michael Brandman Associates.

Jamil Dada, chairman of the Moreno Valley Chamber of Commerce, said he agrees that Moreno Valley needs jobs. Dada has supported the Skechers project and proposals by ProLogis and First Industrial Trust to build distribution centers nearby.

Dada added, however, that he would like to see city officials determine what Moreno Valley residents want on the eastern end. He also said he would like to know what the environmental impact of the proposed changes might be.

'Still a Mess'

A new grassroots group called Residents for a Livable Moreno Valley is expressing concern about the proposed distribution centers. Spokesman Bob Franz said he is not opposed to growth or creating more jobs, but building distribution centers in eastern Moreno Valley does not make sense, given the traffic and pollution.

"It's already still a mess heading west (on Highway 60)," Franz said by phone. "I don't think it's a good idea taking trucks east through the Badlands."

The addition of logistics buildings to the Moreno Highlands would result in less traffic and overall pollution emissions than the land uses under the existing plan, according to Michael Brandman Associates. However, it would result in increased diesel emissions, the consulting firm found in its report.

Benzeevi said any logistics or distribution centers built in the Moreno Highlands area would be built to the same standard as the Skechers building, which is seeking the highest rating under the Leadership in Energy and Environmental Design standards. The developer added that Highland Fairview would take the necessary steps to minimize the effects on air quality and traffic as much as possible.

The logistics proposal and the future of eastern Moreno Valley are expected to be issues in the Nov. 4 election for the 3rd Council District seat, which represents the area.

Incumbent Frank West has said his constituents are concerned about building distribution centers on the eastern end of Moreno Valley. But West has four challengers: Robin Hastings, Mike Rios, Ray Carbajal Jr. and Robert Burks.

Moreover, the Moreno Valley Taxpayers Association has spent about \$120,000 on a campaign to oust West and fellow incumbent Councilman Charles White. Highland Fairview Properties has contributed \$60,000 to the effort, according to the most recent campaign finance reports that have been submitted.

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