

La Quinta City Council unanimously rejects Coral Mountain Resort project, wave pool

Plans for a large development in La Quinta that would include hundreds of houses, a hotel and a high-tech surf wave basin — a centerpiece that's drawn strong opposition from some residents and climate experts — were unanimously rejected by the city council Wednesday night following a lengthy meeting in a room packed with both opponents and supporters of the project.

The vote marks a major defeat for the current plans for Coral Mountain Resort, a roughly \$200 million private development mapped for 386 acres of vacant land on the southwest corner of 58th Avenue and Madison Street.

The La Quinta City Council held several hearings on the proposal in recent months, and delayed a decision on the project in July to give the developer more time to address residential concerns, particularly water usage for the centerpiece wave basin.

The council heard more about those concerns — as well as the developer's rebuttals — during its meeting Wednesday. Ultimately, all five members declined to advance the proposal, which included zoning and general plan changes to allow for the hotel and wave pool, arguing the developer's request did not meet the "higher threshold" to warrant such substantial changes.

"What I see is a developer that hasn't pushed the weight above their head," councilmember Robert Radi said, using a sports analogy. "I don't see how I can support the change in the general plan ... I can only conclude that the project is not consistent with the fundamentals of the land use and the use of resources as per the general plan."

Recent hearings over the development have lasted several hours, as many locals — including members of the group "La Quinta Residents for Responsible Development" — have spoken against the proposal, which was narrowly advanced by the city's planning commission in April.

Their concerns have largely centered on whether the wave basin would be an appropriate use of water amid a historic drought across California that experts say has been fueled by climate change.

But about half of the people at the packed-house meeting were supportive of the project, with several people wearing t-shirts that stated "ON BOARD: CORAL MOUNTAIN" across the front.

One of the proponents donning a shirt, Danilo Kawasaki, told the council he was speaking on behalf of more than 160 La Quinta residents who wrote a letter in support

of the development. He also recalled visiting the Surf Ranch near Fresno, the only spot already using the wave technology from champion surfer Kelly Slater that would be used at Coral Mountain.

“I’m not a surfer. I went on vacation with my kids, but I have to say it was one of the best days of my life,” Kawasaki said. “I was able to catch waves, I was able to have fun, my kids enjoyed it. ... For people like me with young kids, young families, I think this is going to be a great attraction to La Quinta.”

Wednesday’s meeting was more than two years after plans for the project were first announced in 2020 by Meriwether Companies and Big Sky Wave Developments, who teamed up as CM Wave Development LLC to buy the land. The plans includes zoning changes to allow a hotel with 150 rooms, and all homes on the development would be allowed to operate as short-term rentals.

The development would bring “the largest, rideable open-barrel, human-made wave in the world” to La Quinta by using Slater’s wave technology, according to a statement announcing the project in February 2020. The final proposal included a 16.7-acre wave basin, and developers recently reduced its water surface to 12 acres, after initial plans called for a basin covering 20 acres.

The Coachella Valley Water District has said it has adequate supply to serve the project “without substantially decreasing groundwater supplies,” according to the environmental impact report. Coral Mountain Resort would use more than 900 acre-feet of water per year, with about 13% of that usage coming from the wave basin. An acre-foot is about 326,000 gallons, or enough to serve at least two households for a year.

Those leading the project have tried to ease neighbors’ concerns which also include the potential for noise and light pollution in areas surrounding the wave resort, well in advance of Wednesday’s meeting. Last fall, the developer hosted a live demonstration of how light would impact the area at night, though it left some residents unconvinced.

Recently, after asking the council to delay its decision in July, the developer announced several changes to the plan in response to concerns.

The changes include reducing the size of the main wave basin, reducing the height of the lighting poles around the basin from 80 to 40 feet (that change also increases the number of light poles from 18 to 55), reducing the maximum height of buildings by five feet and a moratorium on any special events at the resort for its first two years.

The developers have also offered to add a new 0.25% transfer tax on the resale of all homes within the project to support health and social programs in the area, donate at least 1,000 surf hours per year for charitable uses and contribute \$1.5 million to a turf-reduction program in the La Quinta area.

James Vaughn, an attorney representing the Coral Mountain developers, ran through all of the new benefits offered by the project's backers, noting the tax revenue it would bring the city through the plan's short-term rentals, as well as the other funding for local community programs and upgrades to a nearby substation.

"The project protects the environment and enhances water conservation (through the turf rebate program)," Vaughn said. "The project has no impact on the quality of life or the surrounding residents."

"When you balance the project's benefits against any negative effects, it's not even close," he added. "This project is a clear winner for the city and for its residents."

But the proposed benefits ultimately didn't move the needle for members of the council. Mayor Linda Evans said the public benefits were "too little, too late" in changing the public perception on the project.

Others at the meeting pushed back strongly against the developer's notion that the project promotes water conservation. Local resident Laura Dolata questioned how the project could be allowed to proceed as California residents are being asked to conserve water amid a historic statewide drought.

"We're at a point in history where we cannot be freely wasteful of water," Dolata said. "While the rest of the world is screaming about water conservation, including all the experts and scientists, the federal and state governments, the developers say, 'No problem, we have plenty of water' — yet the rest of us who live here must conserve and reduce our water usage and will in fact be penalized for overuse."

Dolata also argued changing the area's zone to include tourist commercial zoning — which would allow for the 150-room hotel, wave basin and other resort amenities — would be unfair to nearby neighbors, calling such a move "completely contradictory to the whole concept of why zoning laws exist in the first place."

Her comments on the proposed zoning changes were echoed by other residents, including one who said such a move would be a "breach of trust" by the council against its constituents.

In their initial presentation, the project's developers noted similar developments — with tourist commercial zones in close proximity to residential areas — exist in other parts of the city, pointing to the La Quinta Resort and the Rancho La Quinta Country Club as examples.

A 750-home community with 18-hole golf course was previously approved for the Coral Mountain development. But supporters of the project argued the valley has more than

enough golf courses, while the wave pool would offer a new attraction to younger people in the area.

The development project also had the support of the La Quinta Chamber of Commerce, as well as the Southern California Builders Association. Joe Hammer, who has properties in La Quinta and the nearby Vista Santa Rosa area, encouraged the council to approve the project, arguing it would set the course for future development in the city.

“We have to look in the future -- This is not just one project,” Hammer said. “Other developers are looking at us ... (If) La Quinta is not open for business, I know where they're going: right across the street from where I'm at, which is Vista Santa Rosa.”

However, the council ultimately decided against advancing the development, despite some admitting the wave pool would be an attractive amenity for La Quinta.

"I think this is a cool project — I really do — but I don't think it's in the right location, and maybe the timing isn't great because of the drought," Evans said.

"But I feel like La Quinta would deserve a project like this someplace in the city," she added. "I think that we can be on the forefront of having something like this in different times, and maybe that's where our sphere of influence comes in."

It wasn't immediately clear what will happen with the existing plans for the nearly 400-acre plot of land, but John Gamlin, president of CM Wave Development LLC, told The Desert Sun his team will soon begin evaluating its options.

"We're disappointed with last night's outcome and will evaluate our options in the near future," Gamlin said in an email Thursday morning.

Councilmember John Peña noted the hearing "could've gone either way," adding it certainly won't be the last tough development decision to come before the city council.