



Everything New Orleans

Covington City Council votes to annex The Groves at Mile Branch

Published: Wednesday, November 16, 2011, 7:10 PM



By **Claire Galofaro, The Times-Picayune**

The **Covington City Council** has voted to annex a mixed-income housing complex on the edge of the **West 30s neighborhood**, a years-old project turned contentious in the run-up to the spring mayoral election. After an hour of discussion, including one councilman's preference to postpone the vote for a third time, the council voted Tuesday night to annex **The Groves at Mile Branch**, a 15-acre, \$24 million development designed as workforce housing.



Enlarge

Scott Threlkeld, The Times-Picayune

SCOTT THRELKELD / THE TIMES-PICAYUNE Anthony Babb of Hico Inc., give the paint a touch-up on a screened-in porch Tuesday, June 28, 2011, at The Groves at Mile Branch in Covington. The Groves at Mile Branch, photographed Tuesday, June 28, 2011, is a mixed-income development in Covington. The first units of the place, which is touted as affordable workforce housing, will be open by July.

The Groves at Mile Branch in Covington gallery (18 photos)

"We're delighted with the outcome," said Victor Smeltz, executive director of Renaissance Neighborhood Development Corp., the subsidiary of Volunteers for America developing the complex. "It's been a very good process -- it's been a very long process, which is a testament to the city's due diligence."

City officials long said the development's 94 apartments and 35 single-family lots would be annexed into the city. But because the project was built, in part, with federal grant money that required construction in unincorporated St. Tammany Parish, the complex could not be annexed until construction was completed.

Annexing an already-built subdivision is unusual, Mayor Mike Cooper said Tuesday. "The process put us in this position. Hopefully we won't be in this situation again."

The city entered an agreement with the developer in October 2009, which laid out plans for annexation. The project progressed quietly until the latter days of last spring's mayoral campaign between Cooper and Maureen "Moe" Clary, a former president of Habitat for Humanity who consulted on the project.

Cooper mailed a flier asking, "What is Moe Clary building in our backyard?" It questioned Clary's involvement in the project and purported that city taxpayers would be on the hook for a \$163,000 water bill.

Clary, who filed an ethics complaint against Cooper because of the flier, placed a distant second in the race.

Cooper said Tuesday that all city departments have inspected the complex and found it satisfactory.

On Tuesday, the conversation turned to several unresolved maintenance issues, including a disagreement about whether the city would be responsible for maintaining the complex's detention pond.

"We don't go onto private property and take care of people's lawn," said Councilman Sam O'Keefe.

In the end, the developers agreed to maintain the pond if that would push the project forward.

Councilman Lee Alexius asked Smeltz why the development wants to be annexed into the city.

The development will bring 130 new families within walking distance of downtown Covington, Smeltz said, and they want to be "both philosophically and legally part of the community."

Smeltz said the last apartment was rented two weeks ago. Habitat for Humanity bought 10 of the 35 single-family lots, and Renaissance intends to work with local contractors to develop the others.

"I'm not against this project," said Councilman Larry Rolling. But, he said, he'd feel more confident voting for annexation once he knew the city wouldn't inherit pricey fixes.

The council tabled a vote on annexation in August, then again in October.

"I know we don't want to hear this," Rolling said and motioned to table the vote once again.

No one seconded his motion.

Councilman Lee Alexius noted that, upon annexation, a developer is required to post a warranty bond worth 25 percent of the value of the infrastructure, or about \$300,000 in the case of The Groves.

Smeltz said that, as problems arise, Renaissance would be "happy to fix it ourselves." And if they don't, the city has \$300,000 at its disposal.

"I'm OK if we've got that warranty bond," Alexius said.

Six councilmen voted in favor of the annexation ordinance, amended to specify an inclusion of the warranty bond. District A Councilman John Callahan abstained.

Alexius ended the conversation with: "It's been a long road."

Claire Galofaro can be reached at cgalofaro@timespicayune.com or 985.898.4828.

© 2011 NOLA.com. All rights reserved.