

SANTA FE NEW MEXICAN

Planning panel OKs MorningStar facility

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A Colorado-based company on Thursday night got a green light from the city Planning Commission to develop an assisted living center in central Santa Fe, more than a year after the City Council shot down the company's proposal to put the same project on a southeast-side site where it faced stiff neighborhood opposition.

Matt Turner of MorningStar Senior Living faced no opposition in seeking Planning Commission approval for an 85-unit residential care facility on Pacheco Street.

Unlike a public hearing on the earlier proposal, in which a crowd packed the Santa Fe High School gymnasium floor for a City Council appeal hearing, no one showed up to testify at Thursday's commission meeting at City Hall.

"Going once, going twice," acting commission Chairman Brian Gutierrez said as his stunned colleagues looked into the audience.

About 20 minutes later, the panel unanimously approved MorningStar's request for a 76,500-square-foot assisted living facility in a commercially zoned area off Pacheco Street, across from a Smith's supermarket and a block from a U.S. post office.

Members of the commission commended Turner and his team for their “tenacity” in finding a more suitable location in the city for their project after their initial proposal to build a facility next to the Elks Lodge on Old Pecos Trail created divisions in the community and among elected officials.

“This is an interesting gauntlet in the city,” said commission member Jack Hiatt, a former city land use director. “For 400 years, we’ve been doing this, whipping people to death. I’m just grateful that you had the tenacity to come back, and I want to welcome you with open arms.”

Turner said his experience in Santa Fe “has been as unique as Santa Fe as a city.”

“It’s been a longer road than we probably initially planned,” he said, “but we’re happy this worked out.”

Turner said the city and its residents “were true to their word.”

“They asked us to go find a site that they felt like was more appropriately zoned for this use,” he said. “We did that, and they’ve lived up to their end of the bargain.”

The commission’s vote Thursday comes more than a year after a divided council overturned a Planning Commission vote to allow a similar MorningStar facility on Old Pecos Trail.

Despite strong neighborhood opposition, the governing body initially approved MorningStar’s request on a 5-4 vote but then reversed course when the mayor switched his vote.

For the Pacheco Street site, MorningStar held neighborhood meetings in June and August. Most concerns expressed by neighbors revolved around traffic.

A traffic report commissioned by the developer found that the proposed facility would account for only 2 percent of the total daily traffic on Pacheco Street and generate 20 percent less traffic than if an existing office building on the property were occupied.

“Redevelopment of the property as a senior living community is the best solution to achieve a reduction in potential traffic impacts to Pacheco Street,” JenkinsGavin, a Santa Fe-based land use and project management firm that represented MorningStar, wrote in the application.



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