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### **Planners vote down church's bid to build 1996 letter promises to keep the land open**

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#### Article Text:

Pastors at Skyline Wesleyan Church want to build a retirement home on eight acres of church property, but the local planning group says the land was promised to remain open space.

Pastor Dan Grant initially said no such pledge was made, and the church moved ahead with the idea of building a retirement complex overlooking state Route 94 east of Via Mercado.

But Grant was caught by surprise Tuesday night when planning group chairman Jack Phillips read from a June 1996 letter from church officials agreeing to preserve the eight-acre parcel and restore coastal sage scrub on the site.

Grant said yesterday that consultants for the church will review documents to determine what promises were made when the county Board of Supervisors approved construction of the church 10 years ago.

"We want to act with integrity," Grant said.

The planning group rejected the church's proposal to change the local community plan to pave the way for the retirement home project. The vote was 9-2-2, with planning group members Jim Schmidt and John Krueger voting in the minority. Members Dan Hyatt and Gloria Rippenger abstained.

The group is only an advisory body, and its decision can be appealed to the county Planning Commission and Board of Supervisors.

Don Fitchett, a member of the planning group since 1987, said he was shocked that church officials proposed building on the land.

"They're going back on their word," he said. "The church is reneging on their agreement with the county."

The church was seeking to change the allowed land use for the property to build up to 24 dwellings per acre. Skyline Wesleyan Church owns 133 acres off state Route 94, but can only build on less than 24 acres.

Grant said the church decided to build a retirement home, which would offer health care and transportation, after conducting research that showed a need for more senior housing. The number of units in the complex hasn't been determined, he said.

About 2,800 people on a typical weekend worship at the church, which is housed in a four-story building that's become a local landmark for its immensity. The property and construction cost more than \$26 million.

Phillips, a member of the planning group for 26 years, said the group approved plans to build the church only after church officials promised that nothing would be built on the eight-acre parcel, plus another 100 acres that were set aside.

"That is a parcel that is absolutely intended to be open space in perpetuity," Phillips said.

When representatives from the church disagreed, Phillips pulled out the letter outlining plans to preserve the property. It was signed by senior pastor Jim Garlow and Jim Fletcher, chair of the church's building committee. Fletcher has since left the church. Grant said yesterday that Garlow didn't recall the letter, but does not doubt its validity. Grant said he wasn't aware of the letter until Phillips read it at the meeting. He said church officials may have promised to keep the land as open space, but the plans could have changed when the church construction was ultimately approved by supervisors in August 1996.

Caption:  
Proposed retirement complex  
PAUL HORN / Union-Tribune1 MAP

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