

Controversy Swirls Around Santolina Water Plan Delay

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Water has always been at the center of the controversy over Santolina, a massive project planned for over 20 square miles on a dusty mesa west of Albuquerque. The project got another boost Tuesday after officials voted to allow the project's developers more time to come up with a plan for water use.

The mixed-use development is expected to be home to around 90,000 people, making it the largest planned community in New Mexico and one of the biggest population centers in the state.

Santolina's developers say it will bring jobs and encourage growth, and the water utility says there's enough water to supply the development. That vision has enticed a majority of Bernalillo county commissioners to support the project. But at this week's hearing, the project again faced fierce criticism from the public.

When the county gave the initial approval for the project two years ago, it was on the condition that the developer and the water utility have an agreement governing Santolina's water use in place before moving forward with the next phase of the approval process. But the developer asked the county to waive that condition.

In the end commission newcomer, Democrat Steven Michael Quezada sided with the county's two Republican commissioners in favor of letting the development proceed without a water agreement in place.

New Mexico Environmental Law Center attorney Jamie Park argued against letting the project go forward without a water agreement.

"We were not surprised," Park said. "We expected the board to just go ahead and do what the developers requested of it. It's still not lawful."

Park said problems with the zoning for Santolina haven't been worked out, yet. Letting the developer kick the water agreement down the road, she said, to what's called the Level C stage of the approval process means it could be hammered out behind closed doors, as that stage of planning isn't public.

"And there's no guarantee that that information will even be provided at Level C through this development agreement," Park said. "The developers can come back again and say 'we can't get a development agreement from the water authority, so don't make us get one.'"

But Bernalillo County and Santolina's developer say that won't happen. Enrico Gradi, who runs the county's Planning and Development Services department, said postponing the water agreement is the best way to go. That way the water utility will be able to review more details of the project before signing off on the water agreement. Plus, Gradi said, discussions about water for Santolina will be public.

"That's the way it's worked in other plans that we've done as a county," Gradi said, "and that's the way that the water authority is proceeding with this private development plan."

County commissioners will decide whether to approve the next phase of Santolina later this month.