

Alert City Planning Allows Design Sophistication to Overcome Barriers

BY DAVID C. DOZIER

Can strict zoning regulations last for an entire century? If they do, can they be flexible when a development project which really makes good sense comes along? Chandler, Arizona, is an example of affirmative answers to both questions.

When Dr. Alexander John Chandler, the first veterinary surgeon in the territory of Arizona, subdivided his 18,000-acre ranch shortly after 1900, he envisioned a town of the highest quality. The new science of irrigation and restrictions on the water prompted Dr. Chandler to establish his own zoning requirements for this "new town" just a few miles southeast of Phoenix.

Today, almost a century later, Chandler is one of the brightest spots in Metropolitan Phoenix's urban sprawl. The population, upwards of 170,000 and growing strong, makes Chandler the second fastest-growing city in America, among those over 100,000.

And, to Dr. Chandler's credit, the city's zoning restrictions are still double-tough. Just ask AIMCO, Apartment Investment and Management Company, based in Denver. AIMCO owned an 18.6-acre site in Chandler along busy Alma School Road on one side and backing up to the picturesque San Marcos Golf Course and Hotel on the other. The tract was zoned multi-family, and AIMCO was proceeding with plans to build a \$17 million, 324-unit apartment complex to be named The Greens. It was to be configured in 10- and 14-unit buildings, featuring one, two and three-bedroom floor plans. A pretty routine situation. . . or was it?

When AIMCO and architect Mark Humphreys of Humphreys & Partners, Architects of Dallas, went before Hank Pluster, the city's planning services manager, it was as if Dr. Chandler himself were sitting at the head of the table. No more typical apartments in Chandler was the prevailing message. Pluster said that

all development in Chandler is subject to a preliminary scrutinized approval process. "Even though the tract had been zoned multi-family since the early 1980s, approval could have been denied if the design wasn't deemed appropriate. We were not in the mood for another 'box car' complex."

Joseph DeTuno, AIMCO's senior vice president for redevelopment, was a step ahead in his planning. "I wasn't happy with what we had planned, and I knew the City probably wouldn't be either. I had read a lot about a revolutionary new design concept and so I investigated it."

What happened next was a complete and pleasant surprise to everyone. Pluster seemed resolute to the fact that he was going to see the same old apartment drawings. But when

DeTuno and Humphreys unveiled their renderings, they witnessed a totally unexpected reaction.

The city planner showed an immediate expression of surprise, as Humphreys remembers. "This doesn't look like apartments," Pluster said. "This looks like a house."

Why the sudden change of heart? The city officials

were getting their first taste of what is taking the country by storm in multi-family design, "The Big House," which Humphreys has trademarked. The design simply does away with the traditional breezeway look of apartments and it creates a typical single-family street effect through the creation of driveways, garages, private entries, individual addresses, street signs and even street lights. The concept totally complements a high-end single-family neighborhood.

City Planner Pluster's reaction to the Big House apartment design is not unique today. The same sort of thing is happening in cities throughout America as design sophistication overcomes barriers which were previously insurmountable.

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The Greens in Chandler, Arizona.