

Ridgeline Deed Held by Out of Town Investor

By Tina Richards

The ongoing public relations effort to gain community support for the rezoning of the Ridgeline Country Club property is based on a neighborly premise that might not be true.

OPA resident John Martin is a principal in Ridgeline Equestrian Estates and the perceived owner of the parcel. He has used his good standing in the community and his position as local resident to convince the neighbors that rezoning the land from open space recreational to residence is in everyone's best interest.

It is most assuredly in the best interest of Claus Dieckell, the president of Milan REI IV, LLC, who, according to the grant deed, owns the property. The Laguna Niguel resident has been involved with a number of real estate partnerships and limited liability companies that specialize in the acquisition, development and management of commercial and apartment properties. Ridgeline appears to be just another of his investments.

What's in a Name?

He has no ties to Orange Park Acres, save for John Martin. But neither Martin, nor Ridgeline Equestrian Estates, nor JMI (Martin's investment company) appear on the title.

"It doesn't matter; it doesn't change anything," Martin says. "I'm the applicant, I'm the managing partner, I'm the principal. The business arrangement is a private matter."

Dieckell's Milan REI IV paid \$11.6 million, or roughly \$227,000 per acre for the then-golf course, country club, swimming and tennis facility. When the property was purchased in July 2006 it was zoned recreational open space.

In August 2006 Martin began talking to the community about his plans for the property. He identified himself as the managing partner in Ridgeline Partners, LLC, which, he noted, was part of Milan Properties. He did not disclose that he is not the land's legal owner, and that a South County investor holds the title.

The Neighborhood Watch

"We now have an opportunity to work with our neighbors to design a plan for this site that reflects the needs and wishes of this special community," Martin said last December. Since then he has held community meetings, passed out Equestrian Estates brochures and held luncheons for local leaders.

Despite community input that shunned a zone change and praised the recreational opportunities the acreage currently provides, the developer's 38-home Ridgeline Equestrian Estates proposal was unveiled last summer. The project will require not only a zone change, but a general plan amendment, an Orange Park Acres specific plan amendment and conditional use permit changes.

In exchange, Martin is offering six acres for a riding

arena that he says OPA residents helped design. He describes the proposed riding facility as a "the single greatest contribution to secure the rural heritage within OPA."

Opposition Mounts

Martin's neighborly attempts to gather community support for a zone change has had mixed results. Some residents support his right to use his property as he chooses; others have resigned themselves to inevitable change. The OPA Association opposes it; property owners abutting the parcel are against it and the most vocal residents want the recreational/open environment to be preserved.

The developer has since buttressed his community outreach with hired gun Stephen Sheldon. Sheldon is an Orange County attorney specializing in land use issues. His focus is on governmental relations, political consulting and coalition building, and has represented developers on entitlement projects statewide. He has ties with the Orange City Council and many other county officials.

Adding this Orange County power broker to the team gives the appearance Martin is now going around the community and straight to the City Council, who will ultimately make the rezoning decision.

Claus Dieckell, with apartments in Southern California and a shopping mall in Idaho, has not weighed in on the OPA debate.