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Giant Sterling Ranch development wins rezone

Denver Business Journal - by Dennis Huspeni

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The Douglas County Board of County Commissioners late Wednesday approved a zoning-change request for the sprawling Sterling Ranch development, paving the way for one of the largest master-planned communities in the metro Denver area in recent years.

Developers spent two years convincing Douglas County staffers and elected officials that the project would be a benefit to the county and easing their concerns over the project's impact on water supply, density of housing and traffic. They estimated 31,000 people would live there.

Plans for Sterling Ranch ([website here](#)) include 12,050 houses on 3,400 acres of land in northwest Douglas County, bordered by South Santa Fe Drive to the east and Roxborough Village to the west. Much of the development would be south of Titan Road.

It would include five elementary schools, a middle and high school, a 100-acre sporting complex and a medical center by Centura Health's Littleton Adventist Hospital. It is expected to take 20 years to build.

"This is huge," said developer **Harold Smethills**. "Douglas County has incorporated water conservation into planning for the first time. This will set the standard for the state."

Commissioners **Jill Repella**, **Steven Boand** and **Jack Hilbert** voted 3-0 to approve the zoning change request from agricultural to residential. They also approved an appeal to the county's water requirements, lowering them for the new development.

Commissioners have held several standing-room-only meetings on the issue since April 12, taking input from about 160 speakers.

In a small formality, technical language changes will be made to the water supply plan and the planned development document. Commissioners indicated they will finalize all the paperwork at a business meeting May 31.

"This looks like a great plan to me," Board said, noting he especially appreciated "the 10 percent cooperative water sharing for people in the northwest Douglas County in need of water supplies. ... Of all the things this project brings, that is one of the most important to me."

Smethills, principal at Sterling Ranch LLC, has been planning the \$4.3-billion project for 10 years with his wife, Diane Smethills, and **Jack Hoagland**, former executive for Richmond American Homes of Denver.

Smethills said previously his company has spent "tens of millions of dollars" on the proposal and it has "been in hearings for five years."

The developers successfully argued the county's water requirements per home were too high and showed actual-use data from Denver-area homes that was much less than the county standard and similar to the amount to be used at Sterling Ranch homes.

That information was coupled with planned conservation efforts, like rainwater collection, showing the new community would use two-thirds less water than traditional developments. It will be the county's first renewable water development, commissioners noted.

The Dominion Water and Sanitation district, formed for Sterling Ranch, is "currently executing the purchase of renewable water," according to the company's website. That water will come from the Denver Basin and Aurora sources.

Economist **Patty Silverstein**, president of Development Research Partners Inc. of Littleton, predicted Sterling Ranch would create 1,000 construction jobs annually during the build-out phase, 9,000 permanent jobs upon completion and have a \$411 million annual economic impact. Those estimates came in a report paid for by Sterling Ranch officials.

Builders involved with Sterling Ranch include M.D.C. Holdings Inc.'s Richmond American Homes, Ryland Homes and KB Home.

Board tried to lower the density by adding a range of 9,170 to 12,050 housing units, but the other commissioners wouldn't agree to it.

"I don't want to shackle the success of this project," Chairwoman Repella said, noting lenders might gravitate to the lower number.

Smethills said there's still a lot of work to be done and they don't anticipate breaking ground until 2012, with the first homes coming in 2013.

"This allows us to live a dream we've had for years," he said. "We're building a community for a younger generation that's not even born yet."

> [Click here for the DBJ's 2010 report on plans for Sterling Ranch.](#)

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