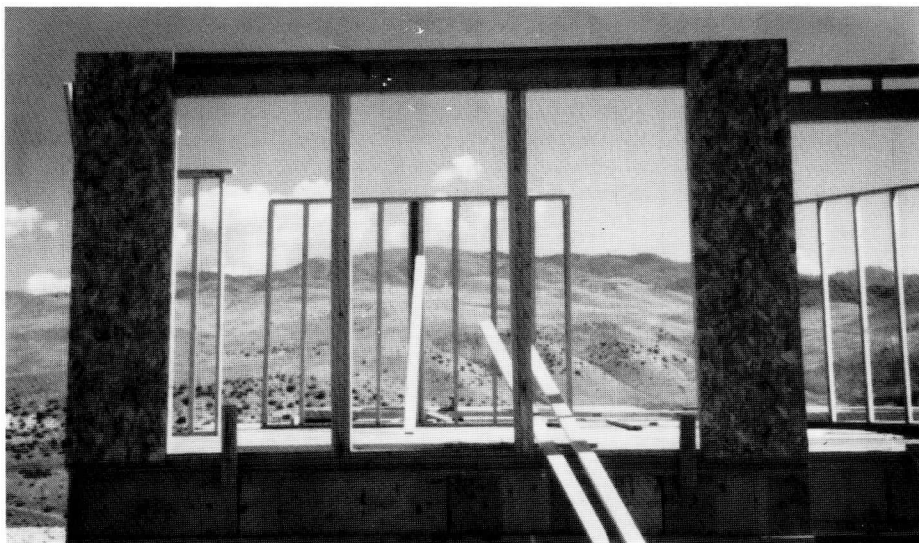


WHAT'S DEVELOPING IN THE FOOTHILLS?



Photograph by Gary Richardson

Somerset Ridge subdivision located in the hills east of Eighth Street.



Photograph by Diane Ronayne

The Boise Front as seen from a new home on Table Rock Road.

PacMan Planning on the Boise Front.

For Commissioner Margaret Johnson, it was the last straw.

Once again, developer Al Marsden was asking the Boise City Planning and Zoning Commission to let him change his plan for the Somerset Ridge subdivision clenching the hills east of Eighth Street Road.

Johnson would not approve additional homesites without a complete reexamination of foothills planning by the commission. "The intent of the foothills ordinance is not being met by current development," she told her colleagues. "Now is a very good time to take a good look at foothills planning."

Marsden wanted to adjust some grading, realign a street, and add a few lots to the next phases of the development — seemingly minor changes, but the most recent of many since the project was

conceived more than a decade ago.

Boise attorney Terry Coffin calls it the PacMan approach to planning. He says Marsden has been wearing people down with a "piecemeal, 11-year development which people who own property have to fight every week." Coffin has watched from his home overlooking the new subdivision: "He's torn up the land without permits, and then blamed it on the surveyors."

According to Coffin, Marsden keeps taking bites that modify and stretch the original concepts and conditions of approval for the development. He estimates that Somerset Ridge has been the subject of at least 45 commission and city council hearings since it was first approved in 1978. The planners, commissioners and council members have all changed since then.

Keeping Up with the Changes

City planners confirm the lack of institutional memory. They, too, have trouble keeping up with all the changes. "The history is very convoluted," says city planning director Wayne Gibbs. "It's mixed up, and the staff has to go back and sort it out."

City planner Carla Martin has been sorting out Somerset Ridge plans for more than four years. For her, Marsden's continually changing development is not unusual.

"When the hillside developments were originally approved, they had higher density, in clusters, on the flatter and more easily developable areas, and large amounts of open space in between the clusters," Martin says. "Over the years those hillside developments have undergone a market-driven change to nearly all single family development, which

requires use of much larger land areas per dwelling unit, and a resulting loss of space. It also has led to development in areas originally thought undesirable for development due to steep slopes and the need for more cut-and-fill."

The changes have occurred gradually as modification to small portions of hillside developments have been approved. The cumulative effect, with Somerset Ridge as well as other hillside developments, is to decrease density and increase the amount of land disturbed, Martin explains.

"There is a long-term policy issue which will need to be addressed," she says. "Are high densities in the easily developed hillside areas preferable to lower densities which create greater disturbance to the natural land forms?"

Al Marsden and the Market

While he admits that market conditions have changed, Al Marsden says his departures from the plan approved in 1978 have not been market driven at all.

"There's been a change in the basic philosophy of the subdivision," he says, "from mid-class to high class, medium sized lots to larger lots." Marsden says he wants to make Somerset Ridge "the best possible project in the community." For him the basic concept of foothills planning is to allow "balanced development" adjacent to downtown.

"Our objective is a balance between what is natural and what is man-made," he says, claiming that 40 percent of Somerset Ridge will be put aside for public use.

"The master plan was basically a bubble diagram, a concept design," he says. The original Somerset Ridge plan approved 369 dwelling units on 200 acres, with many "patio homes and townhouse apartments." Now the plan is to build mostly single family homes, about one per acre. "I doubt I'll reach 200 units," Marsden says, "at most, 250. With less units, less area will be disturbed."

Struck by the irony of his statement, planning and zoning commission chair Anne Barker asked Marsden why he now wants to divert two acres from open space to add three building lots to the subdivision.

"I've made so many commitments," he said, rattling off a list of expenses for water and sewer lines and other projects. "I need to make it work economically."

"We've experienced in the marketplace people's desire for larger lots," Marsden went on. "The market was asking me continually to make 'em bigger and bigger. People were cramming \$200,000 to \$1 million houses in these small lots. It's what they want."

After several hours of discussion, the planning and zoning commission approved the street and grading changes Marsden asked for but rejected the request to add lots to the next phase of the subdivision.

Planning by Default

It was not the raw numbers that defeated Marsden's request — the "added" lots would still have kept the number of single-family homes below that approved in 1980 for the first, 90-acre phase of Somerset Ridge. But as surely as Marsden's bulldozers were laying bare the sandy substrates of the Boise Front, his sometimes fortnightly requests for modifications had uncovered fundamental weaknesses in Boise's approach to foothills development.

"We go through this every month,"

"He's torn up the land without permits, and then blamed it on the surveyors."

Commissioner Dennis Kelley said. "I'm afraid I'm losing patience."

"This becomes planning by default and the residents of Boise deserve better," adds Elaine Clegg, co-chair of the North End Neighborhood Association. "We are very concerned about the direction that hillside development is taking with much more cut and fill and general disturbance of the natural contours and vegetation."

"The foothills ordinance was a compromise worked out to minimize the impact of development on our neighborhoods," she says. Without an updated conceptual plan there will be no way to know what those impacts will really be.

Building on Sand

Marsden's Somerset Ridge is probably not the worst example of hillside development. Like prime-time television, "it's what they want." It is certainly not what "we" wanted when the rules for foothills development were laid down a few years ago. Someone with staying power, skilled in the vagaries of the planning bureaucracy can, to quote Commissioner Margaret Johnson again, "do just about anything."

The people who put the current foothills ordinances on the books are no longer in office. It is now going to take a lot of public pressure to get foothills development back on the right footing, literally as well as figuratively. Given the geological makeup of the Boise Front, a firm foundation for what goes on up there could be important to all of us.

A foolish man built his house upon sand: and the rain descended, and the floods came, and the winds blew, and beat upon that house; and it fell: and great was the fall of it. — Matthew 7, 26

Gary Richardson

Gary Richardson lives in Aldape Heights, Boise's first foothills subdivision, developed in the 1950s. He co-chairs the Boise Front Coalition and chairs Friends of Military Reserve.

Future Foothills Subdivisions

"When did they make it private land?" was the common reaction last spring, when more than a hundred signs were erected along the Boise Front to discourage off-road driving in the foothills.

A lot of people don't know that as you drive out of town along Rocky Canyon, Eighth Street, and Bogus Basin roads, for the first several miles you are traveling through private land.

The varied terrain of the Boise foothills, like the hills of San Francisco, offers some of the most topographically interesting, if geophysically questionable, subdivision sites a developer can imagine. Only a short drive from downtown, with the best view of the city and surrounding valley and mountains, much of this land will be developed some day.

G.R.



Photograph by Diane Romayne