



Tom Zanic, vice president of New Urban West Inc., is proposing 730 homes on 425 acres in unincorporated Harmony Grove. The Harmony Egg Ranch can be seen at right. *Scott Linnett / Union-Tribune*

Builder wants 730 homes on land near Escondido

By Daniel J. Chacón
STAFF WRITER

Standing on the edge of a weedy, dusty hilltop overlooking an egg ranch yesterday, Tom Zanic heard chickens squawking but envisioned neighbors talking.

Zanic is vice president of Santa Monica-based New Urban West Inc., which is proposing 730 "country-style homes" on 425 acres in the unincorporated and mostly agricultural community of Harmony Grove, west of Escondido.

Like most other developers, New

Urban West promises its project will be a good one.

"We're going to do our best and come out with a completed rural village that we can all be proud of," said Zanic, who worked in state and local government for about 10 years before joining New Urban West in 1983.

But unlike many other developers, New Urban West is known for its ability to orchestrate public support for what it wants to build.

A committee called Friends of

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New Urban West was started in 1999 to win approval for Brookside, a 222-home gated community and golf course off Broadway in north Escondido. The committee has more than 800 members, including some of the city's movers and shakers, and has contributed more than \$30,000 to local groups.

"New Urban West has been a very positive developer to work with," said Escondido Mayor Lori Holt Pfeiler. "They are responsive to the community's needs, and they respect that the city wants high-quality development."

The company is working now to engender the same kind of good will in Harmony Grove, and it seems to be succeeding.

The property, which includes both the Harmony and Ward egg ranches and the Eden Vale Dairy, is bordered by Mount Whitney Road on the north, Country Club Drive on the east, Harmony Grove Road on the south and Wilgen Road on the west.

For the past nine months, Zanic and a team of community relations specialists have been meeting with residents. The team includes Linda Bailey, former chief executive officer of the Escondido Chamber of Commerce, and Tom Tomlin, a public relations consultant who

served as Ronald Reagan's assistant campaign manager when he ran for governor.

"Most builders and developers go into a community and tell the community what they're planning to do," said Tomlin, who points out that the newly formed Friends of Harmony Grove has enlisted more than 50 members. "That's why they always get into the problems they get into."

From gatherings in living rooms and kitchens to two focus groups, Tomlin said, New Urban West officials have met with more than 100 people. Most said they didn't want to lose the area's rural character. As a result, the proposed project includes multipurpose trails and subdued lighting, but no gates, red-tile roofs, apartments or condominiums.

"Everything is tailored for Harmony Grove," Zanic said.

In addition, plans call for a small village center with a fire house, general store, shops, a few offices and a nine-acre equestrian park. A six-acre park for kids is planned near the heart of the development.

"There will be a variety of home styles, ranging from small intimate cottages of 1,000 square feet to estate homes of more than 5,000 square feet," a company media release says.

"The key is to be willing to listen to people when you ask them for their opinion," Zanic said. "It takes a lot of work, and

it takes a lot of time, but we think it's the right way to do it."

The project has encountered some critics, however, including those who suspect that New Urban West plans to try and connect the houses to Escondido's water and sewer system without being annexed to the city.

But Tomlin described that as speculation, and said the project would have its own sewer and water service from the Rincon del Diablo Municipal Water District, which serves parts of Escondido.

Pfeiler, the Escondido mayor, said her city would welcome the project.

"We would like to claim it as our own, but we understand that it's out in a more rural area, and they want to develop in the county, and they want to develop with their own identity, and that's fine," she said.

In addition to Brookside, which opened in November 2001, New Urban West is developing Brookside II, a 40-home extension that started construction in May.

The company's most recent proposal, called Rancho Vista Monte, would be built on 130 acres in southeast Escondido, on the old site of the Brower Dairy near the San Diego Wild Animal Park. Plans call for a gated community with 80 upscale single-family homes of more than 3,000 square feet each.