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Youthful Discretion

By Paul Hughes - 12/3/2007

Orange County Business Journal Staff

Aliso Viejo, Orange County's youngest city, officially turns seven next year. "And there's still a lot we want to do," Mayor Carmen Cave said.

Officials master planned the city of 45,000 people and now are looking for ways to tweak it. They're watching people and patterns—who they are and how they live—to see what the city needs to stop doing, start doing and keep doing.

The challenge: finding things for residents to do besides working and shopping, including more community facilities and using Aliso Viejo's vast parks and open space better.

Aliso Viejo became the county's 34th city in 2001. Of course it predates that, with neighborhoods stretching back some 20 years. The city's marquee Summit Office Campus is 10 years old and still growing.

Like the rest of California, Aliso Viejo's origins date to rancheros with massive land holdings. In this case, Juan Avila got the land grant from Mexico in 1842. The Moulton family carved 22,000 acres out for its Moulton Ranch in the 1890s.

South County Model

In many ways, Aliso Viejo is South County: a city whose growth has been more planned than organic and modeled after standard-bearer Irvine with wide, winding streets and cul-de-sacs. Offices go here, shopping goes there, homes a little to the left. It even has college in the Buddhist-inspired Soka University.

"It's a well-rounded community good for families," Cave said.

Aliso Viejo even has emerged as a primary rival to Irvine for corporate headquarters and regional offices, luring QLogic Corp., Quest Software Inc., Buy.com Inc., Valeant Pharmaceuticals International, Lennar Corp. and a major office expansion for Newport Beach-based Pacific Life Insurance Co.

Now Aliso Viejo, like Irvine, is dabbling in a bit of new urbanism more common in Santa Ana and other North County cities. Shea Homes, part of Walnut-based J.F. Shea Co., is building some 400 live-work lofts and townhomes at its Vantis project.

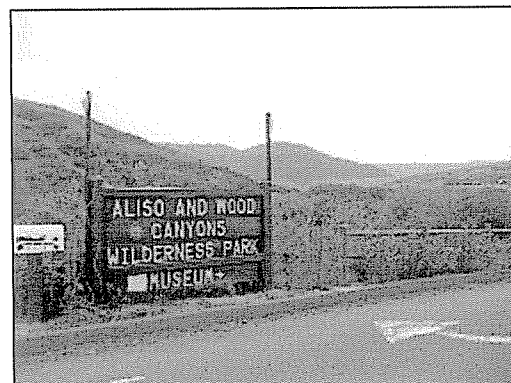
City officials describe the project, and the city's overall aim, in Aliso Viejo-specific terms.

"It's not live-work," Councilman Bill Phillips said. "It's live, work, play, shop and learn."

Aliso Viejo tries to meld the ideal with the real. Parker Properties LP, the city's major developer, helped push the city along with its Summit Office Campus, which got under way in the late 1990s.

After the San Joaquin Hills (73) Toll Road opened in 1996, the Summit became a viable alternative for companies looking beyond Irvine for space near the South County homes of their workers and executives.

The toll road "put Aliso Viejo on the map," said Russ Parker, vice chairman of Parker Properties.



Aliso and Wood Canyons
Wilderness Park: 3,400 acres of
open space

The Summit is made up of stylish buildings and attractive landscaping. Even the parking structures are nice.

"We're building a place here," Chief Executive Lee Redman said. "It's not just a token picnic table or palm tree."

Pacific Life Building

Pacific Life's under-construction building stands to be the tallest in Aliso Viejo at nine stories. Two four-story buildings also are in the works at the Summit.

Parker is developing and Irvine's Snyder Langston is putting up Pacific Life's 242,000-square-foot building, which the life insurer plans to own.

The building is designed to house 1,200 workers and initially will hold about a thousand, according to Pacific Life.

"The way it's laid out, the feel, the open spaces, the high quality of the other buildings, the image when you drive in: an employee comes to work and it adds to a sense of pride," said John Mulvihill, Pacific Life's vice president of asset management.

Pacific Life, which plans to keep its Newport Center headquarters, looked at Irvine, Newport Beach and Aliso Viejo for the expansion.

It mapped employee ZIP codes, analyzed drive times, toured three sites in Irvine and Aliso Viejo and met with city officials.

Aliso Viejo won out.

"The city's image is excellent," Mulvihill said. "They wanted Pacific Life and they've done everything they said they would."

Selling Points

The toll road and the Renaissance Club-Sport—a six-story, 175-room Marriott Renaissance hotel with a 70,000-square-foot upscale gym due in spring—also were selling points, according to Mulvihill.

It didn't hurt that approvals took only 13 weeks, Parker President Kevin McKenzie said.

"It came down to the ability to execute, to build the building and meet the schedule," Mulvihill said. "We had a high degree of comfort with the city."

The company didn't spend much time looking in Irvine, according to Mulvihill.

"They're a bigger city and had more going on," he said.

Pacific Life is expected to move into the building on schedule in March.

Shea's Vantis is Aliso Viejo's other big office park and also includes condominiums. When done, the project is set to have 700,000 square feet of commercial space along with some 400 homes. A three-story 78,368-square-foot office building finished there earlier this year.

Build Out

Once Vantis and the Summit are done—bringing Aliso Viejo's total office space to about 5 million square feet, a little more than half that of the Irvine Spectrum—the city will be built out.

Something that's set to stay forever is 2,600 acres of open space spread among 23 parks, plus the 3,400-acre Aliso and Wood Canyons Wilderness Park.

The city's rapid growth—going from 10,000 people in 1990 to 40,000 in 2000—has meant crowds and traffic. Aliso Viejo is projected to reach 50,000 people in a few years, with housing planned at Shea's Glenwood project and at Commons at Aliso Viejo Town Center.

Newcomers stand to spur population, as do current residents. The median age of someone in Aliso Viejo is 33. A quarter are younger than 17.

But with growth comes growing pains.

The United States Postal Service wants to put a 417,000-square-foot mail processing facility in the city. Aliso Viejo officials are battling the proposal, which stands to bring 100 truck trips a day and round the clock operations.

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