

## A Sustainable Community Outside L.A.

**T**he new town of Centennial is still just an idea on an open landscape of barren hills and fields stripped of vegetation by 100 years of cattle grazing. Located a few miles away from the traffic on Interstate 5 at the edge of Los Angeles County and 60 miles north of the city, the new master-planned community will be bounded on the north by the farmland and small towns of the San Joaquin Valley, expected to become the busiest new population center in California over the next 30 years.

The 11,700-acre site of a former cattle ranch is well outside the congested metropolitan area and buffered from other development by millions of acres of national forest. The founders of Centennial—Tejon Ranch Company, Pardee Homes, Lewis Investment Company, and Standard Pacific Homes—are proposing that the new town should include the many dimensions of sustainable design—architecture, landscaping, water and energy conservation, mass transit, and even control of light pollution. The idea, say its founders, is for the new community to embrace smart growth by maximizing the benefits of intelligent land use such as preserving large amounts of open space, incorporating paseos and bike paths, offering all types and prices of housing, creating village centers, and, in general, establishing compatibility between humans and nature. Most challenging of all is the stated goal of discouraging the urban sprawl associated with “leapfrog” development.

Located along the historic Ridge Road, the forgotten highway that was the chief route between northern and southern California before Interstate 5 was constructed in the 1950s, Centennial will be built on the site of a historic Mexican land grant on a vast “rancho” that has remained intact since the 19th century. The site is adjacent to Quail Lake, a natural body of water that is part of a statewide system of reservoirs joined by concrete aqueducts that snake across the land in S-shaped channels.

The planning for Centennial is based on the principle that well-planned and -executed large-scale communities in noncontiguous areas can be consistent with smart growth and sustainability, offering benefits that cannot be provided by piecemeal, small-scale development, while also fulfilling the need for workforce housing in fast-growing urban areas. Centennial’s planning aims for a small town quality, not entirely unlike Reston, Virginia, or Seaside, Florida, with housing grouped into several villages. Each village will have a center containing neighborhood-serving uses such as shopping, daycare centers, and small professional offices. By the time the final phase is built, it will be a place where a significant percentage of resi-

dents can work in the same community in which they live. Approximately 23,000 homes are planned, with a 12 million-square-foot business park and another 2 million square feet of neighborhood retail centers, accommodating 30,000 jobs. The rate of homebuilding will follow market conditions, with an estimated 1,000 homes coming online annually.

About one-half of the site will be preserved as permanent open space. Much of this already forms a natural ring of hills around the community, which will be planted in native grasses and wildflowers. Natural drainage areas will become landscaped greenways serving as linear parks and pedestrian paths throughout the community—a demonstration of how flood control measures can result in open space that is both active and attractive.

Sustainability at the individual home level also is being addressed. The goal is for each home to lower its electricity use by 15 to 20 percent, and its water use by 20 to 25 percent, compared with most homes of comparable size. To avoid wasting water, recycled water will be used for watering and irrigation of parks, common areas, public medians, and two golf courses. A satellite hookup that anticipates both temperature and rainfall will regulate computerized sprinkler systems to prevent water waste. All homes are required to obtain “Energy Star” certification that sets increased standards for insulation, heating, air conditioning, and energy-efficient appliances. The community will be landscaped with plants that are native to California and require little or no water. The plan also includes optional use of sustainable materials, such as carpeting made of recycled materials, flooring made of bamboo, and solar panels. The architecture is to be regionalized for California climate, with houses including deep overhangs for shade, as well as abundant plantings of shade trees.

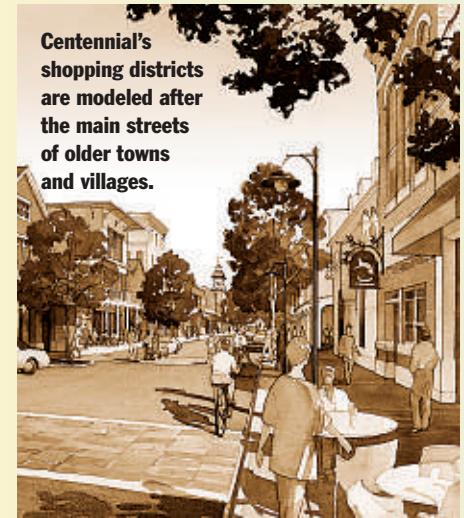
The intent of Centennial is to be a self-contained, self-reliant community that achieves what Californians call “the jobs/housing balance”—a strategy that seeks to lower traffic on regional arterials and cut the negative effect on air quality by encouraging people to live and work in the same community.

Centennial will have an internal transit system as well as two transit stations from which buses will shuttle residents to job centers and regional malls in nearby cities. The buses will connect in Santa Clarita with the Metrolink train as well as with commuter bus services that run into downtown Los Angeles, Pasadena, Burbank, west Los Angeles, and other business centers in Los Angeles County.

One of the hurdles facing Centennial, says Centennial vice president Greg Medeiros, is the notion of building a stand-alone new community, rather than adding onto an existing urban area. Critics of the project contend that this is leapfrog development that fosters unplanned sprawl. Medeiros emphasizes that Centennial’s infrastructure is “sized to the project, including the housing, the commercial development,

police and fire stations, schools, parks, a library, and medical services.” In other words, he argues, “There is no excess capacity to support any further development down the road. And with a wide margin of open space surrounding the community, it will be difficult for sprawl to trickle over into, or out of, Centennial.”

Designed to help fill the huge housing gap in Los Angeles County, Centennial will offer homes priced to fit the budgets of teachers, firefighters, seniors, and young families, as well as a lifestyle built around small-town living, points out Medeiros. Two of the biggest demographic markets for the housing, he notes, will be “echo boomers,” the children of baby boomers who are seeking affordable housing, and



empty nesters who are seeking a quiet community. Apartments also are planned as part of the project.

Currently, the partners are completing the required environmental studies and taking the initial steps in the public process. Surprisingly, Medeiros notes, the majority of Centennial’s future neighbors say they want urbanity, or, in his words, “They want something more or less like ‘Main Street.’ The project will bring a wide range of housing, jobs, shopping, medical facilities, cultural amenities, and educational institutions to an area that currently is without most of these services, he adds. The partners will be funding the entire infrastructure, including eight elementary schools, two high schools, two to four fire stations, a police station, a library, two water reclamation plants, and hundreds of acres of parks and public spaces.

While it is not possible to build a new town without its having some impact on the natural environment, Centennial, according to Medeiros, represents an attempt to create a pedestrian-styled community that provides the most benefits to residents and does the least harm to the land, and every attempt will be made to intelligently reconcile those two different agendas.—**Morris Newman**, a Los Angeles-based writer