

Government Center's Out, Learning Center's In

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City-owned land at Chrisman Road and 11th Street could sprout a new school campus for the Tracy Learning Center within five years. Glenn Moore / Tracy Press

The Manteca City Council recently put the final touches last week on a deal for a San Joaquin County government center that's expected to bring to that city 200 jobs instead of Tracy.

But Tracy has finally taken baby steps to get development off the ground on city-owned land at Chrisman Road and 11th Street, where city officials tried but failed to have the government center built.

It's expected to be four or five years before construction begins on a \$50 million South County government building, slated for 10 acres of land Manteca owns next to the Big League Dreams softball fields on Highway 120.

It could be that long before the Tracy Learning Center finally has a campus at Chrisman and 11th Street, though opinions differ on whether Tracy could have sweetened the deal to win the government center.

Certainly San Joaquin County Supervisor Leroy Ornellas of Tracy thinks so.

"Manteca stepped up to the plate and hit a home run," Ornellas said. "Tracy went for a bunt and dribbled the ball behind them."

Officials in Tracy have a different view.

County officials had about six or seven sites in mind when it started its search for a South County government center, but by this spring, it had narrowed it down to two that are both in Ornellas' district: The Highway 120 site in Manteca or in Tracy on Chrisman Road, where the city owns about 110 acres.

Officials here had no way of knowing it at the time, but while Tracy officials tried to figure out how much of the costs they would share with the county and how much in fees they'd charge, Manteca officials were plotting what the city could give away to the

county and how much of the costs it could shoulder itself.

For the Board of Supervisors, when the two deals were compared side by side in May, it was no contest.

"I had nothing to advocate for the Tracy property," the supervisor said.

The Manteca property had one big thing going for it over the Tracy land to begin with, such as the fact that it's right next door to sewer and water pipes that can be hooked into. Though Manteca offered its land to the county for \$1 and Tracy said the county would have to pay \$800,000 for the Chrisman Road land, the city offered to plow that money back into the project to pay for underground pipes or other costs, said Tracy's City manager Leon Churchill.

Manteca offered to build a \$1.5 million storm drain that the county would have to maintain. Tracy said the county would have to pay to build a retention pond, and it would be responsible to pay to hook into a sewer pipe south of railroad tracks north of the Chrisman property, which Churchill estimated would cost about \$2 million.

Manteca also locked in \$1.84 million development fees, while Tracy told the county its fees would be \$2.3 million, plus \$13,496 in building fees, a \$9,569 application fee, its fair share of entitlement costs, plus .47 cents per square foot in school fees for the roughly 400,000-square-foot building.

While Tracy argued its centrally located in South County, and that a private master developer could construct the building and lease it back to the county, and that the city would contribute \$150,000 to the deal, it was hardly enough, Ornellas said.

Nor did Tracy seem flexible, but rather told the county, "Here's the deal. Take it or leave it," Ornellas said. "I think Tracy missed a tremendous opportunity."

Churchill said the city "went as far as I thought we could go" without having to dip into the money it uses to run the government. He added Manteca was able to use redevelopment money, but that the city's land on Chrisman Road is outside Tracy's redevelopment district's boundaries.

Tracy bought 112 acres at Chrisman Road from the Alvarez family in 1987 for \$2 million, and in the 1990s the City Council earmarked that land for future park use.

But the council in recent years rejected that site for youth sports fields, which will now be built on city-owned land near the former Holly Sugar plant. It also rejected Chrisman Road as a potential spot for an aquatics center, which is now tied to a future subdivision on the northwest corner of Linne and Corral Hollow roads.

Last year, Tracy announced plans to team up with a "master developer," Concord Eastridge, Inc., to construct a campus that would lure colleges to town.

And a couple of weeks ago the City Council voted to have the firm work with the Tracy Learning Center to move ahead with plans to build a new campus on Chrisman Road. The Learning Center now houses three charter schools in cramped quarters at Beverly Place and Holly Drive, and it's the hope of its executive director to have a new campus built within five years, if not sooner.

Stanislaus State University, which offers Tracy classes for graduate students to get a business master's degree, will also be part of the campus.

"We're stuck right now with no ability to expand," said the Learning Center's head, Virginia Stewart.

Stewart said she's met a few times with people from Concord Eastridge, who have been paid \$5,000 so far by the Learning Center to help draw up plans for the new campus.

There is \$2 million in school bond money to get land for a new campus for the Learning Center, which has 500 students waiting to enroll once space becomes available, said Stewart.

The director said the center will look for a lease/purchase agreement with the city's developer. Stewart said the center has calculated it could afford to pay about \$1 million a year on a 30-year lease for about 25 acres of land if it can get 72,000 square feet of building space.

She said the Learning Center seems to be pushing development of the city's land at Chrisman Road.

"It's put a sort of new spirit out there," she said.