



Land-sliding away

Thursday, May 4, 2006

For weeks, now, this newspaper has been filled with stories about hillsides moving and the miserable consequences for the people who own homes on, or below, those sliding hills.

It strikes us as both curious and a bit callous, then, to hear some comments being made by Morgan County Council members.

But first, some history: The County Council voted a couple of weeks ago to allow about 830 homes on 1,200 acres in Mountain Green. And in Phase 2 of the development, which will see 149 homes, there are 76 homes on lots that could, potentially, experience some kind of sliding in years ahead.

The county is requiring, then, that the buyers of the 76 homes be made aware that the possibility of instability exists.

"There's a certain amount of buyer beware," Councilman Bart Smith explained. "The county is doing its part to put them on notice."

The Standard-Examiner's correspondent Deanne Winterton quoted Morgan County Engineer Austin Rowser as being even blunter: "History has proven that (those lots) may not be the best place to build. Small failures are always a reality, but we do not have a county ordinance to address grading of the lots."

That sounds a lot like leaders washing their hands of the decision to let development proceed on hillsides that everyone agrees may become unstable.

Losers in the 4-3 vote -- not counting the homeowners who may be out of luck someday when their homes become uninhabitable -- were the council members who think the majority is making a mistake. Councilman David Gardiner summed it up when he said, "We have to be concerned when we hear the heartache of people with landslides on their land. I feel we're setting a very dangerous precedent."

No kidding. If Morgan County doesn't have adequate laws on the books to give its leaders the power to stop development of homes on land that may slide, it should begin investigating its options in that regard. Furthermore, if those homes are built, the possibility of slides better be known to every buyer of every home in perpetuity. Likewise, lending institutions and insurance companies should be examining whether or not it's a good idea to finance and insure homes built on potential slide areas.

As for the morality of building homes on potentially unstable lots, in a perfect world nobody would attempt such a thing. But we understand that people demand to live on hillsides and will pay a premium price for the opportunity. The developer, Gardner Development operating under the name Cottonwood Creek LLC, should be able to give homeowners some assurance that it has built homes that won't be ruined by slides. If it can't, maybe it should re-

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evaluate whether or not those homes should be built.

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