

Potential development worries neighbors

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Three years in the making, the Bachtold Annexation could bring hundreds of new homes to a rural edge of the city.

By **FORREST HOLT**
of the Walla Walla Union-Bulletin

A housing developer is seeking to build a dense, 390-home neighborhood on the southern edge of town, but it must contend with environmental and infrastructure concerns as well as complaints from neighbors who want to preserve the area's spacious, rural character.

Oregon-based Hayden Homes plans to submit a development application to the city in the coming weeks and begin development in spring of next year, land development manager Brian Thoreson wrote in an email through the company's marketing director.

A majority of the neighborhood would consist of "middle-market housing" along with a combination of large houses with three-car garages and cottages, which Thoreson wrote "are designed for a key demographic that is currently struggling to find available and affordable housing in and around Walla Walla."

However, before that happens, the Walla Walla City Council must approve annexing the 106 acres of farmland into the city.

Landowners Jon and Mary Bachtold, of Bachtold Christmas Trees, first petitioned to annex the land in January 2016. When the City Council took up the "Bachtold Annexation," city staff wanted to hold off on approving it while a stormwater analysis was conducted, Development Services Director Elizabeth Chamberlain said. The area has a history of stormwater drainage issues, including a few flooding events between 2003 and 2005.

Residents of the Table Rock neighborhood — flanked to the east and south by the Bachtold property — have expressed their worry that

developments nearby could make more flooding likely, but Hayden Homes has drawn up a concept to build a stormwater storage pond and drainage system that Chamberlain said should put those worries to rest.

Beyond flooding concerns, some Table Rock residents have said Hayden Homes' planned neighborhood would break with the rest of the area's character.

In a letter to the editor published in the Union-Bulletin on March 31, Brad Rice wrote that he and his wife moved to Walla Walla, hoping to "go rural." Their property has a view of the Blue Mountains over the Bachtold property, and Hayden Homes' plan is much denser than any future development he would have expected.

"There is no question existing property values throughout this area will be negatively impacted by a development of this nature," Rice wrote.

In a written statement, the Table Rock Homeowners Association said the neighborhood would be significantly denser than the rest of Walla Walla and even impact tourism.

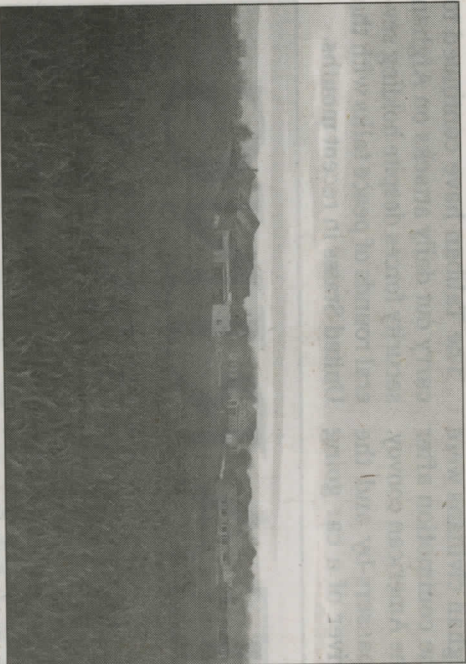
"(The development would be) out of character for Walla Walla and more like the population densities found in developments in heavily populated Western Washington," the statement read. It went on to state, "Is this the type of development (density) conducive to the tranquil growing region that Visit Walla Walla and Chamber of Commerce promotes? Does this high density connect to the local landscape and existing developments around it?"

Significant traffic impacts due to increased population in the area were also inevitable, according to the Table Rock Homeowners Association letter.

City staff have considered this. A traffic impact analysis would be included in Hayden Homes' development proposal, Chamberlain said. If traffic were predicted to increase severely enough, she said, the developers would share the cost of infrastructure

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Officials weigh potential impacts to traffic, utilities



U-B photo by FORREST HOLT

The Bachtold property overlooking the Table Rock neighborhood from Kendall Road. Table Rock residents have said such a dense neighborhood, as envisioned by Hayden Homes, would be disruptive and break with the area's character.

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improvements. It is too early to tell if that option is under consideration, though, until the more detailed development proposal is submitted, Chamberlain said.

City Councilman Riley Clubb, who has championed at several events over the last year for affordable and diverse housing in Walla Walla, said he would support the annexation if the developers and the city can reach a plan to address potential impacts to traffic and utilities.

"If we can find sufficient

solutions to the impacts that density has, I'm all for it," Clubb said.

Last year, Clubb was a vocal supporter of changing the city's zoning codes to allow for neighborhoods like the one planned on the Bachtold property. Before the changes, Table Rock and many other neighborhoods on the south side of town were tied to 9,600-square-foot plot requirements for single-family homes.

Clubb said that kind of zoning excluded people who would not be able to afford a house on property

of that size. He pushed to collapse the three tiers of single-family zones into what is now called "neighborhood residential." Housing in Walla Walla would be more diverse and affordable now if those changes were made decades ago, he said.

"Options for housing should exist everywhere in the city," Clubb said. "I don't think it's our business to establish different zones that dictate the quality of housing in a neighborhood and keep people separate in that way."