

Otay Mesa housing project with 450 townhouses gets city approval



The Candlelight project in Otay Mesa will include 450 townhouses. It is not expected to open until late 2025. (Cornerstone Communities Candlelight Townhomes in Otay Mesa.)

By Phillip Molnar

San Diego planners gave unanimous approval Thursday for an Otay Mesa project with 450 townhouses.

The Candlelight project is located in one of the few undeveloped areas of San Diego County, about a mile from the U.S.-Mexico border on vacant land. Although the plan had previously been approved, changes to the unit types required a new vote.

Environmental concerns, and plans for mitigation efforts, have kept the project in the planning stages, off and on, for roughly 12 years. After Thursday's vote, the developer anticipates starting work on the site in September, with the first homes opening in late 2025.

Ure Kretowicz, CEO of developer Cornerstone Communities, said he envisions the project as workforce housing because early cost estimates put townhouses in the mid-\$500,000 to low \$600,000 range. Even the priciest models would be below the \$802,500 median home price in January.

"It's for working-class families," he said Wednesday in a phone interview.

Candlelight's big change was moving from an entirely two-bedroom project to a mix of two-, three- and four-bedroom units. The thinking is there is more of a need for a mix of housing types for different family sizes — something the commissioners said they were glad to see.

While the seven planning commissioners unanimously approved the plan, several said they wished Candlelight would have more income-restricted housing. Based on city inclusionary housing laws when the project was approved in 2021, Cornerstone was required to have nine deed-restricted units. If the project was approved today, it would need to more than double that number.

"All we can do is ask you to play by the rules," said Commissioner Matthew Boomhower. "I just wish we were getting more affordable units out of this."

The deed-restricted townhouses are set aside for buyers earning the county's area median income, \$81,750 for an individual.

The developer said the three-story homes will range from 1,344 square feet to 1,904 square feet. Private courtyards and balconies are planned for residents to take advantage of the weather.

Candlelight is directly south of another Cornerstone project, the 363-townhouse project Vista Del Sur that opened in 2022, and close to San Ysidro High School and the San Ysidro Performing Arts Center.

The vacant land Candlelight will be built on goes over some of Dillons Trail, a unique spot in San Diego County history. In the 1980s, the area became a haphazard settlement of trailers, mobile homes, shanties and other unpermitted structures.

Many of the roughly 100 families who lived there had legally purchased lots, but most lacked access to water, sewers, power or garbage pickup — and didn't get permits for much of anything. The city of San Diego moved to evict most tenants from structures in 1987.

Environmental concerns are at the forefront of the Candlelight development. The project site is 44 acres, but only 24 acres will be used for homes. Much of the land will be used as open space for environmentally sensitive areas that include naturally occurring temporary ponds, called vernal pools, that may have federally endangered fairy shrimp; maritime succulent scrub; and grasslands.

Other environmental considerations were included, such as electric vehicle charging infrastructure, solar panels, energy-saving appliances, drought-tolerant landscaping and trees to cut down on the so-called urban heat island effect. Cornerstone said the project will be almost all-electric, not using gas for heating and cooking.

Planned amenities at the development include two pools (the only place where gas will be used for heating), shaded outdoor workstations and walkways to connect with nearby hiking trails.