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COUNTY SILENCED PROJECT CRITICS, GROUP SAYS  
**SANTA MARGARITA RANCH**  
PEOPLE PLANNING TO WEIGH IN ON DEVELOPMENT FOUND 'AFTERNOON' HEARING HAD  
ALREADY HAPPENED

Bob Cuddy  
bcuddy@thetribunenews.com

The county Planning Commission took away peoples' right to speak when it moved a controversial hearing from its afternoon to its morning session Oct. 9, members of a North County citizens group claim. North County Watch said in a letter to the county Tuesday it will sue if the county does not invalidate its decision on the first installment of the **Santa Margarita Ranch** proposal, 111 homes on 1-to 1.5-acre lots on a 3,778-acre section of the **ranch** southeast of the town of **Santa Margarita**. The County Counsel's Office did not respond to a request for comment Tuesday.

Planning Commissioners voted 4-1 to turn down the development. They criticized its proposed agricultural-cluster design and expressed concerns about its effects on environmental aspects such as water, prime soils and archaeological resources.

But opponents argued that commissioners took the vote only in order to appeal it to the Board of Supervisors, where, they say, Supervisors Katcho Achadjian, Harry Ovitt and Jerry Lenthall will side with the developers and overturn the commission. In January, Ovitt will be replaced by Frank Mecham and Lenthall by Adam Hill. Developer Rob Rossi has written that he wants the project heard by supervisors before the board changes hands.

Rossi, Doug Filippini, and Karl Wittstrom make up the **Santa Margarita** LLC. They have accused the commission of stalling the development.

North County Watch's complaint arises principally from Commission Chairman Bob Roos' decision to move the **Santa Margarita Ranch** hearing from the afternoon session Oct. 9. It had been advertised for the afternoon, and posted on the agenda that way.

Roos said he made the change at the behest of the developers, who called him the night before the meeting. He did not announce it to the public until that morning.

Commissioner Sarah Christie called for a vote of the entire five-member commission. Penny Rappa and Gene Mehlschau sided with Roos. Only Anne Wyatt joined Christie.

Calling the move "a transparent manipulation of the agenda to silence public participation and dissent on a controversial issue of public importance," North County Watch attorney Michael R. Jencks said it "should not be allowed to stand."

"Many members of the public...who came mid-day anticipating an afternoon hearing were disenfranchised and denied the right ...to be heard," Jencks wrote.

He noted that the law gives the county 30 days to set aside the decision. If it does not, he will seek an injunction, he wrote.

Deputy County Counsel James Orton said at the time Roos had the right as chairman to move the agenda item.

The project would be the first phase of development on the nearly 14,000-acre **ranch**. Long-term plans include 400 more homes.

Political infighting has for years surrounded the **ranch**, which would be one of the largest developments in the county's history.