

## **SUDDEN IMPACT**

### **Former college roommates hope to change the face of Lake County with a 1,200-home private golf community for retired Bay Area Baby Boomers**

Robert Hollis, Special to The Chronicle

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**Lakeport, Lake County** -- From time to time in California's rural counties, a subdivision proposal comes along that, if built, promises to fundamentally alter the character of the surrounding region.

One such plan is the \$600 million Cristallago development, a 1,000-lot subdivision that also includes 200 condominium units, an 18-hole Jack Nicklaus golf course and clubhouse that collectively would spread across 856 serpentine acres in the rugged hills northwest of tiny Lakeport, the county seat of 5,200 souls nestled along the western shore of Clear Lake.

Cristallago's backers envision a gated, Tuscan-like community with condos in the \$300,000 range and homes carrying prices into the \$700,000s. A handful of prized hilltop lots with stunning views of Clear Lake and its surrounding basin might sell for more, depending on market conditions, the developers say.

If built out over the next two decades as backers hope, the project would profoundly alter both the size and character of Lakeport and its environs. Its 2,700 or so new residents would put pressure on every public service in town, from traffic flows to sewage flows. It would also bring a new class of wealth to the community where the median household income was \$32,226 in 2000.

Proponents see Cristallago as a destination resort development for aging Baby Boomers willing to plunk down hundreds of thousands of dollars for a retirement home or a second dwelling within striking distance of two major urban centers: the Bay Area and Sacramento.

In addition to the links carrying the Nicklaus marquee, residents would also have access to a private marina on Clear Lake and perhaps be able to enjoy boutique olive oil pressed on site from fruit grown in an orchard to be planted on the property, according to the developers.

But the road from the developers' dreams to the sale of the first home at Cristallago may prove to be as rugged as the green outcroppings that dot the hills.

For one thing, Lake County's supervisors in their preliminary approval of the Cristallago idea last month told the developers to rewrite their proposal to make it more resort-like and with fewer homes, to lessen the impact on rural Lake County.

At the same time, grassroots opposition has surfaced over the size of the project and the way elected county officials chose to bypass the county's general plan that would have perhaps blocked the development. Critics also worry that Cristallago, even if reduced in size, would irretrievably change Lake County's largely rural, affordable small-town character.

Two former college roommates at Cal Poly San Luis Obispo came up with the idea for Cristallago: Mark Mitchell, chief executive of Origin Construction Inc. in Fort Bragg, and Matt Boeger, a principal of the family-owned Boeger Land Development Co. in Gridley (Butte County).

Mitchell, 40, who moved with his family a few miles from Lakeport about four years ago, said he has built motels, other commercial projects and custom homes along the coast around Fort Bragg. Boeger's family traces its farming roots back four generations to August Boeger Sr., a German emigrant who settled in the Santa Clara Valley in the late 1800s.

Boeger, 38, with his father and brother got into the development business in 1989 with Heron Landing, an 8-acre, 292-unit residential project in his hometown, Gridley. The family also farms in the area.

The partners purchased options on 12 adjacent parcels of land that make up the 856-acre site just northwest of Lakeport. They were attracted to it because of its proximity to Clear Lake, its picturesque terrain and for its ease of access to Highway 29, which forms a de-facto western boundary for Lakeport and is the main link to Ukiah and U.S. 101 to the west.

Mitchell said the site offers development possibilities that no longer exist in Mendocino County and especially around Fort Bragg, where he has been building for more than a dozen years. "There just isn't any land left there" for larger projects, he said.

Cristallago isn't the first proposed development on the site. About 20 years ago, the county approved a subdivision on one section and then in 1994 a golf course proposal on another. Both failed, although the golf course developers completed some grading before they pulled the plug.

Despite planned home prices from \$300,000 to more than \$700,000, Boeger says Cristallago will be attractive to buyers who are looking for "an affordable destination resort community" adjacent to the largest freshwater lake in Northern California, offering "the best bass fishing in the United States."

(Cristallago's private marina would sit on a separate 106-acre parcel that is owned by a third partner, Bob O'Neil of Santa Rosa, according to Boeger and Mitchell. They envision a bicycle-hiking trail linking the lakefront with the rest of the development. Some condos would be built adjacent to the covered boat slips.)

As Baby Boomers begin to retire, the developers argue, there are few places where they can find retirement and/or resort communities within striking distance of the Bay Area. The only other large resort development in Northern California with homes in the same price range is Saddle Creek, a golf-themed community planned by Castle & Cooke near Copperopolis, in southwestern Calaveras County.

In order to attract their preferred buyers, Boeger and Mitchell say they want to create development "with a sense of place," incorporating the Tuscan architectural theme along with a world-class golf course, the covered marina, a small commercial area plus numerous hiking and biking trails. "You can't expect to build a run-of-the-mill golf community and expect to succeed," Boeger said. "This is going to be a destination in and of itself."

A Jack Nicklaus "signature" course doubles the million-dollar design fee. For the extra money, the golf legend makes several visits to the course during construction. Developers say this gives the course a higher profile and helps home sites sell for more.

After many months of low-profile preparation, the Cristallago proposal made local headlines in January when the county Planning Commission unanimously overrode its own staff recommendation to reject the project. Then, early last month, county supervisors voted 4-1 after a contentious five-hour hearing to allow the plan to go forward, although only after some major but unspecified changes.

Opponents have seized on the county Community Development Department's largely negative report on the development prepared by Richard Coel, assistant community development director, as a kind of handbook detailing the many reasons Cristallago should be stopped or severely reduced in size.

A major drawback, critics say, is the project's size. The Lakeport Area Plan projects that during the next 15 years, about 863 new dwelling units will be needed to accommodate growth in the community, Coel said. But already, his department is processing applications for seven subdivisions in town totaling 426 lots. In addition, there are a number of individual lots scattered about, plus a tentatively approved subdivision with 37 lots, he said.

"The Cristallago development alone (with 1,200 dwellings) is proposing more housing than needed to meet growth estimates for the next 15 years," Coel concluded.

What's more, looking at land that could be developed within the town's existing boundary, "there is more than twice the amount of land available that is needed to accommodate growth for the next 15 to 20 years." And that's without Cristallago, he said.

Equally important, according to critics, Coel pointed out that Cristallago is proposed on land that sits at least a half-mile outside the Lakeport Area Plan's residential boundary - a classic leapfrogging pattern that is common to suburban sprawl across California and the West.

Critics also point to a lack of available water for the project plus increased sewage flows and potential runoff into Clear Lake.

To deal with the conflicts in the Lakeport and county plans, both the county Planning Commission and the supervisors, in effect, voted to set aside the planning guidelines and allow the developers to move ahead, albeit after coming up with a new perhaps smaller proposal.

"The supervisors, by their 4-1 vote, voted against the planning process," said Victoria Brandon, chair of the Sierra Club's Lake County group and a resident of Lower Lake.

Brandon, a 25-year county resident, is leading the charge against the project via a Web site with links to county documents, news articles and a petition opposing the development.

Both the county's general plan -- currently being revised -- and the Lakeport Area Plan resulted from hours of discussion and negotiation among competing interests, she noted. But the supervisors' vote set aside all that work to accommodate the narrow interests of Cristallago's developers, she said.

The supervisors in their defense argue that they didn't pull a planning end-around but simply gave Mitchell and Boeger a chance to bring their proposal into closer conformance with the plans' requirements. The project is a long way from approval, they said.

Coel said the developers must now come back to the county with a new proposal before the county selects a consultant, who will be paid by the developers, to prepare an environmental impact report. He predicted that the environmental report won't be finished for at least a year.

For their part, Mitchell and Boeger are sanguine about the controversy that Cristallago has stirred in the community. They say they're prepared to resolve all of the environmental and planning issues that come up.



Robert Hollis

Mark Mitchell, left, and Matt Boeger take in the 859 acres that they hope will become Cristallago. Photo by Robert Hollis



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Developers Matt Boeger, left in white shirt, and Mark Mitchell take ATVs over the land they hope will become Cristallago, a 1,200-home development with private golf club in tiny Lakeport, Lake County. Photo by Robert Hollis



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Developers Matt Boeger, white shirt, and Mark Mitchell blast up a hill on land they hope will become Cristallago, a 1,200-home development with private golf club in tiny Lakeport, Lake County. Photo by Robert Hollis