

110 livable places



A lakeside community park fronts the 480-acre Avimor development off Highway 55.

10 More like **AVIMOR?** by Kurtis Hawkins

The Avimor planned development has been a major source of controversy since its land purchase in July of 2003. Questions about sustainability, wildlife impact, foothills conservation, traffic influx and other issues are significant to the valley because Avimor proposes to eventually build 12,000 new homes. The property encompasses 23,000 acres in the area off Highway 55 between Boise and Horseshoe Bend. The first platted village now under development is approximately 480 acres. Other villages are on the drawing board. Avimor is one of the first planned communities to exist in the foothills region northwest of Boise, and as such, can be a case study for future developments that will surely follow.

A planned community like Avimor is a designed grouping of varied and compatible land uses, such as housing, recreation, commercial centers and industrial parks, all within one contained development. To put it more simply, a planned community is zoned for mixed-use. Unlike typical subdivisions that

are zoned only for residential and recreational parks, Avimor eventually will host a variety of uses ranging from housing to commercial retailers.

Spanning three different counties and existing several miles from any city, Avimor and the issues surrounding its development are complex and controversial. For starters, every city has a boundary, and directly outside of that is what is known as the city's area of impact. Because of close proximity, many factors can affect a city from within its area of impact, such as traffic influx, landfill usage, infrastructure development, emergency service capability and many others. Avimor sits immediately outside of Boise's legal area of impact but, as Mayor David Bieter believes, it still will have a great effect on Boise's services and infrastructure. Because the development is on land governed by Ada County, the decision to approve Avimor was made by the county commissioners. Throughout the process several concerns were expressed about the potential impact on Boise and the area surrounding Avimor. New Urbanists and environmentalists resist developments that encourage commuters to drive long distances to and from work. Some citizens and wildlife experts also weren't sure what the impact would be on large game. This is a concern because Avimor is being built on a critical wintering range for a variety of animals like deer and elk. Developments like Avimor can push wildlife into less habitable locations because of noise, pets and fenced-off areas. Even though Avimor has an extensive wildlife mitigation plan, it is impossible to know exactly what effect it will have on the existing wildlife.

In 2006, when Avimor received approval from Ada County, Boise filed a petition for judicial review in Fourth District Court questioning the substance and procedures of the county's decision. An article in the *Idaho Statesman* explains Boise's reason for filing the appeal, stating, "The commissioners appeared to have made up their minds in advance, violating their roles as independent reviewers and decision-makers." Mayor Bieter stated his concerns in a different *Statesman* interview: "While Avimor is technically outside the City of Boise's area of impact, it will have a direct effect on our services and infrastructure," meaning the majority of people living in Avimor will commute to and work in Boise. He believes that increased traffic on already-congested State Street will decrease air quality and impact downtown parking—and that these commuters will not be paying Boise City property tax, even though they will surely be using some of Boise's services. After Boise filed its appeal against Ada County, the City of Star filed as an *amicus curiae*, or "friend of the court." Star's case stated that in attempting to interfere with the land-use decisions of another jurisdiction, Boise threatens the authority of Star and other cities that have a stake in the Avimor develop-

ment and others like it. As it turned out, Judge D. Duff McKee dismissed Boise's appeal, saying the city had no standing in court. Ada County's decision to allow Avimor stood. What can Boise do to prevent future developments from impacting the city in this way? Michael Zuzel, Mayor Bieter's assistant, explained that as far as these "leapfrog" developments are con-



Mule deer in the Boise foothills. Avimor has promoted "zero net loss" of wildlife habitat. Critics say the development contributes to sprawl.

cerned, there is really nothing the city can do. If a development is under the county's jurisdiction, the city has no say over it. It is more difficult for a planned development to get permits than it is for small developments like subdivisions. There are many stipulations that result when a development classifies itself as a planned community. They must be at least 640 acres and be self-contained, meaning they provide for infrastructure like roads, water, electrical power and wastewater treatment. Ada County approved Avimor after developers met the required codes and ordinances and satisfied the conditions put on the project before it could begin.

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Eventually, Avimor's three phases of development will cross through Ada, Gem and Boise counties. The amount of traffic added to State Highway 55 is being studied by the Idaho Transportation Department. ITD and Avimor are working to develop a way to enhance the current highway access and



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Avimor is for sale by SunCor, the original developer. Twenty-three homes have been sold in the project's first two years.

better suit it for the inevitable increase in traffic. The environmental impact of Avimor is a concern that the developers have addressed with a comprehensive wildlife mitigation plan. Developed by Charles Baun of Boise-based Environmental Conservation Services, Inc., the plan explains how Avimor will attempt to limit its impact on the environment. Avimor will withhold 70 percent of its property as open space and will institute a "zero-net-loss" policy

designed to improve substandard land and prevent the displacement of wildlife. The land is surveyed and rated on a one through ten scale. A rating of "one" represents land that is unfit for wildlife habitat; the rating of "ten" represents land that is completely rife with plant and animal life. Overall, the report rates the land at an average of "four." Most of the land is cheat grass that does not sustain much animal life and provides ready fuel for wildfires, says Baun in the plan. Every time a house is sold, the seller pays .5 percent of the gross sales price to the Avimor Stewardship Organization. Those funds will be used to restore vegetation on lower-rated, substandard land so the rating can go from, for example, a "four" to an "eight." By improving the quality of open space, Avimor makes up for the land that houses consume and creates a zero-net-loss of land. The mitigation plan also defines areas that are crucial for wintering animals and explains how these areas will not be fenced, which will prevent wildlife from migrating to other less sustaining areas. Avimor is also trying to reduce its carbon footprint through the building standards it uses. *The Idaho Statesman* published a story about the advantages of building "Energy Star" rated homes, stating, "During 2008, SunCor Idaho Inc. built 19 Energy Star-certified homes in Avimor. These 19 homes are equivalent to eliminating the emissions from nine vehicles and planting 15 acres of trees."

The development is for sale as SunCor's parent company, Pinnacle West, restructures its business. In March 2010, five of Avimor's six staff members were laid off and sales were halted pending the sale of SunCor's assets, according to the *Idaho Statesman*. There are currently 23 houses at Avimor—20 occupied and three that have been sold but that Avimor is leasing back from the buyers. Most of the occupants moved in last summer. The last closing occurred in December 2009, and no houses are under construction at the current time. Avimor has not been spared from the harsh real estate market forces that are affecting other developers. "The economic impact has been profoundly difficult," says John Rogers, sales manager for Avimor. "Housing may have cratered deeper than other sectors, but nobody's getting a free ride on this roller-coaster. Ultimately, the impact has been two-fold—first, to brutally separate the wheat from the chaff, both on an individual developer level and on a development model level, and second, to galvanize the public into re-evaluating their reasons to buy."

Planned communities like Avimor, he says, are better prepared to weather the economic storm. Most are well-funded endeavors with long timeline horizons that can survive market cycles. Avimor, for example, is a 30-year project. "Quality of life issues are of paramount concern for the planned-community developer. If he wants the product to be attractive and



Large planned communities such as Avimor may be the future of foothills development in Ada County. Pictured: Avimor, slowed by the recession in the fall of 2009.

profitable 25-30 years hence, he cannot undermine the quality of life of his previous residents by his own efforts or lack of foresight. The master-planned community is the model of the future and the reasons are obvious," says Rogers. Avimor may have been one of the valley's the first, but it won't be the last planned community. Prior to the nation's economic slowdown, a dozen or more planned communities were in Ada County's application process. That number has dropped by half due to the economy. Even at that,

it is evident that the planned community mode of development will play a role in the region's future. Understanding the ways that people view developments like these and being knowledgeable about the process to approve and govern them is important in keeping the Boise area sustainable for many years to come.

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Kurtis Hawkins is a 1999 graduate of Payette High School. He will receive his BA in mass communication in spring 2010. He plans to begin work next winter on a master's degree in the philosophy of communication, with the goal of teaching at the college level.

What are the most important aspects of a "livable" city?

"A positive, shared understanding of what a city is and should be will make any city livable."