With the community of Del Sur rising in the northern reaches of San Diego, nearly two decades of entrepreneurial passion, political persistence and detailed planning are approaching completion.

No other master-planned development within the city of San Diego has undergone as much public scrutiny as this new community, nor has any development been marked by as much personal commitment to creating an environmental hallmark in large-scale home construction and design. Nature is truly a good neighbor in Del Sur.

While the future of Del Sur will unfold in the relaxed, yet vibrant lifestyle it offers residents, its history is embedded in the colorfully turbulent, sometimes convoluted tale of Black Mountain Ranch (BMR), the umbrella development that encompasses Del Sur. The story has disparate characters—including evangelical leaders, professional golf promoters and influential conservationists. Throughout, one participant has remained prominent: Fred Maas, the developer of Black Mountain Ranch. His perseverance and determination to pursue the project in a socially responsible manner—incorporating sound environmental planning and sustainability in all aspects—have seen the development through to completion.
With the urban sprawl of Orange and Los Angeles counties figuratively just a few miles to the north of San Diego, growth protesters had long been a force in local politics. Additionally, the city has traditionally had a history of strong environmentalism; according to some reports, San Diego has more endangered species than any other area in the country.

In 1976, the City of San Diego General Plan had been adopted, creating in part a 12,000-acre swath that became known by the cumbersome moniker, “North City Future Urbanizing Area (NCFUA).” In 1983, the Campus Crusade for Christ underwent a “phase shift,” approved by the city council, that changed the property’s “Future Urbanizing Area” designation to one of “Planned Urbanizing.” But in 1985, city voters approved Proposition A, which retroactively overturned the 1983 approval and required voter approval for any development in the NCFUA that was more intense than pre-existing zoning. As a result, it limited development to one house per 10 acres or, with consent from the city council, one house per four acres. Anything denser had to go back on the ballot for the voters to approve.

Although Dr. Bright’s group challenged the legality of Proposition A, by 1987, the local development arm for his project was in bankruptcy. An auction of the property by the bankruptcy court was held the following year, with the successful bidder, Potomac Investment Associates, paying $53 million for the land. Fred Maas, who had had a successful career as a political advisor for such national figures as Senator Bob Dole and Congressman Jack Kemp, was a partner of the group, which renamed the project “Black Mountain Ranch” and immediately withdrew the Crusade’s lawsuit. The tract was bordered by Rancho Bernardo to the east, Fairbanks Ranch to the west, Torrey Highlands to the south and Rancho Santa Fe to the north.

In 1976, the City of San Diego General Plan had been adopted, creating in part a 12,000-acre swath that became known by the cumbersome moniker, “North City Future Urbanizing Area (NCFUA).” In 1983, the Campus Crusade for Christ underwent a “phase shift,” approved by the city council, that changed the property’s “Future Urbanizing Area” designation to one of “Planned Urbanizing.” But in 1985, city voters approved Proposition A, which retroactively overturned the 1983 approval and required voter approval for any development in the NCFUA that was more intense than pre-existing zoning. As a result, it limited development to one house per 10 acres or, with consent from the city council, one house per four acres. Anything denser had to go back on the ballot for the voters to approve.

Although Dr. Bright’s group challenged the legality of Proposition A, by 1987, the local development arm for his project was in bankruptcy. An auction of the property by the bankruptcy court was held the following year, with the successful bidder, Potomac Investment Associates, paying $53 million for the land. Fred Maas, who had had a successful career as a political advisor for such national figures as Senator Bob Dole and Congressman Jack Kemp, was a partner of the group, which renamed the project “Black Mountain Ranch” and immediately withdrew the Crusade’s lawsuit. The tract was bordered by Rancho Bernardo to the east, Fairbanks Ranch to the west, Torrey Highlands to the south and Rancho Santa Fe to the north.

Potomac Investment Associates was the official developer of the PGA TOUR, which, in the late 1980s, was seeking a new site for its Buick Invitational at San Diego’s Torrey Pines Golf Course. Although it had a storied history as a tournament venue, the Torrey Pines course had fallen into serious disrepair. If a new San Diego home for the tournament could not be found, the PGA was prepared to go elsewhere.

The summit is the centerpiece of Black Mountain Open Space Park, more than 1,284 acres of chaparral and sage-covered ridges and canyons owned and managed by the city of San Diego. The park’s terrain allows visitors to see what much of coastal southern California looked like a century ago, before the onset of development. A little-known fact is that the holdings represent the 63rd largest city-owned park in the United States.

In the 80s, an undeveloped 4,660-acre tract northwest of the mountain, owned by the Teamsters Union, was sold to a group led by Dr. William R. “Bill” Bright, a highly regarded evangelical Christian and founder of the Campus Crusade for Christ. At the time, Dr. Bright said he had had a vision from God, who told him to build the youth mission’s headquarters in San Diego, in the form of a Graduate Christian University.

When plans for the tract, then known as “La Jolla Valley,” were announced, key environmentalists and antigrowth activists in San Diego were alarmed because the project called for thousands of student housing units to be built and millions of square feet to be devoted to campus buildings. In addition, thousands of residential units were proposed for sale to create an endowment for the university.

Black Mountain’s 1,554-foot summit affords a 360-degree view of the Pacific Ocean to the west, rolling hills to the north and east, and downtown San Diego to the south.
Planning for the development of Black Mountain Ranch had already begun in 1989 when the city asked Potomac and other developers to finance digital mapping of environmental characteristics.

That completed, the city then told developers it wanted several thousand acres of open space to be dedicated to its Multiple Species Conservation Program. The chunk of land the city sought would contribute to a long-envisioned 50-mile open-space area between the seaside community of Del Mar and the mountain town of Julian.

Maas was in discussions with the city regarding the open space when, following the 1990 municipal election, council members backed by environmental and no-growth advocates gained control of City Hall and imposed a two-year, citywide moratorium on residential building.

With the building freeze, the PGA TOUR was ready to abandon San Diego. But, in 1992, on the day after the moratorium expired, the city council approved the Black Mountain Ranch plan to build at the higher density of one home per four acres.

While this would allow BMR to build some 1,000 homes on 4,000 acres, plus two golf courses, several key stipulations were added by the city. Notably, the city wanted the developer to finance the infrastructure for not only the approved one-house-per-four-acre density, but for several thousand more homes, too. The cost for such a commitment would exceed $250 million and include a large network of roads. This requirement essentially forced Maas’ group — now known as Black Mountain Ranch LLC — to go before voters in 1994 for approval of a “phase shift” that would permit a higher housing-density plan and make it possible for the company to afford the up-front infrastructure costs.

Again, the city council added a complication. It now required that all property owners in the North City Future Urbanizing Area appear on the 1994 ballot together, developers and individual owners alike. This would not be a marriage of mutual interests, and such important environmental groups as the Sierra Club and the Audubon Society strongly opposed the measure. Proposition C, the November 1994 ballot measure to permit an increased housing density in the entire 12,000-acre NCFUA, was soundly defeated at the polls.

Some seven years after the purchase of the 4,660-acre Black Mountain Ranch site, the first bulldozer had yet to be seen. Faced with the front-loading of over $250 million in infrastructure costs, BMR began a dialogue with the city. The PGA TOUR, meanwhile, had reached an agreement with Torrey Pines Golf Course for improvements, and the Buick Invitational remains there today. Had it not been for the negotiations pressed by Black Mountain Ranch with the city, the PGA TOUR may have abandoned San Diego in 1992. Today, Torrey Pines and the Tournament are among the crown jewels of the PGA TOUR.

To raise capital and buy time for planning parts of the project where infrastructure requirements were the most demanding, a portion of Black Mountain Ranch was sold. That area is now known as “Santaluz.” A successful 1996 ballot measure (Proposition C), sponsored by Black Mountain Ranch, approved a hotel and limited commercial uses on a portion of the remaining property.

The city, meanwhile, insisted that BMR build three roads to disperse traffic so that no one community would be forced to accept the burden of new development. This included financing, construction and provision of rights-of-way for important segments of the regional transportation system, such as portions of Camino del Sur, Camino del Norte, San Dieguito Road and Carmel Valley Road.
In the mid 1990s, BMR began meeting with the Sierra Club, which has a large and active chapter in San Diego. Del Sur became the first development in which the Sierra Club took an active and collaborative planning role, and Maas also held scores of meetings with other environmental organizations and community planning groups.

The developer had long been a proponent of “green building,” construction practices that embody respect for the environment, and he was empathetic with many of the groups’ concerns. He also recognized that nature-friendly materials and building plans are not only better from an ecological standpoint but also make economic sense over the long term.

Over the course of several years, Maas was able to reach an agreement with the Sierra Club and others for higher standards in such critical areas as water quality and erosion control—standards that went beyond what most city and state agencies required at the time. He also made provisions for solar energy to be incorporated into building plans, planned transit centers and van pools for the development, and helped establish and finance Move San Diego Inc., a nonprofit group that supports a mix of transportation alternatives throughout San Diego. Additionally, he helped the Sierra Club identify voters inclined to support environmental issues and sent promotional messages on behalf of the organization to them.

When Proposition K went on the November 1998 ballot to increase housing density in Del Sur, it was with the endorsement of the Sierra Club and other environmental and community groups. The most vocal opposition to the proposition came from the homeowners’ association of Fairbanks Ranch, an affluent community to the west of the area by the city council. This, however, required another ballot proposition—this time, for the 1998 citywide election—that would allow an increase in residential housing density. It would be the third time voters would decide the fate of the property, and Maas was determined to enlist some key allies.

“Del Sur became the first development in which the Sierra Club took an active planning role.”

BMR also pledged substantial dollars to help complete State Route 56 and provide improvements on Interstate highways 15 and 5—the first time a private party had anted up money for an Interstate highway. In total, some $25 million was committed. After Santaluz was sold, BMR sought to realize the general plan adopted for the development by the city council. This, however, required another ballot proposition—this time, for the 1998 citywide election—that would allow an increase in residential housing density. It would be the third time voters would decide the fate of the property, and Maas was determined to enlist some key allies.

BMR soon after achieved city approval of a tentative map—and a planned development permit—for another sub-parcel within Black Mountain Ranch, Verrazzano, which was subsequently sold. The sale of Santaluz and Verrazzano ultimately left Black Mountain Ranch with a housing-density ratio that suited its vision for a walkable, intimate, village-like community, as well as the capital to begin development. A tentative map for the remaining area, now known as “Del Sur,” was approved by the city in 2001.

Development began with bridge construction and grading in 2003, followed by construction of internal streets and homes and the community’s information center, known as the “Ranch House.”
When completed, Del Sur will have 2,582 single-family attached and detached houses and 469 affordable apartments and homes. (“Affordable housing” typically is available for families who make less than 65 percent of an area’s median income.) A 500,000-square-foot business park will be built, and another 200,000 square feet will be added for select retail space; a hotel, two schools and a fire station are also slated.

Two 800-foot parallel arched bridges are complete—one north, one south—on Camino del Sur, the community’s main road. The bridges span a permanent, natural open-space “critter corridor” that includes 18 miles of community hiking and bike trails.

In 2007, Del Sur’s Ranch House earned Platinum LEED (Leadership in Energy and Environmental Design) certification for new construction from the U.S. Green Building Council, which sets the national standard for smart-growth, eco-friendly design and building practices. This Platinum certification is the highest ranking from the U.S. Green Building Council. Today, the Ranch House is open to the public as an environmental resource center featuring many of the sustainable design and construction practices built into the homes of Del Sur.

The community of Del Sur was also the recipient of California’s most important environmental award—the Governor’s Environmental and Economic Leadership Award (GEELA). Del Sur was honored in the category of comprehensive land-use planning, which GEELA defines as a project demonstrating “social equity and adequate housing; cost-effective infrastructure and transportation; water and energy efficiencies; and open-space conservation to protect forests, agriculture, watersheds and other ecosystem values.”

In all, about 60 percent of Black Mountain Ranch—nearly 2,800 acres—is dedicated to open space. Open space also has been provided as a buffer between the adjacent communities of Fairbanks Ranch, Rancho Santa Fe, Rancho Bernardo and Rancho Peñasquitos, guarding against the run-on development characterized by urban sprawl.

Del Sur’s Ranch House is not only one of the most eco-friendly buildings in San Diego but also one of the most environmentally progressive buildings in the world.

In 2007, Del Sur’s Ranch House earned Platinum LEED (Leadership in Energy and Environmental Design) certification for new construction from the U.S. Green Building Council, which sets the national standard for smart-growth, eco-friendly design and building practices. This Platinum certification is the highest ranking from the U.S. Green Building Council. Today, the Ranch House is open to the public as an environmental resource center featuring many of the sustainable design and construction practices built into the homes of Del Sur.

The community of Del Sur was also the recipient of California’s most important environmental award—the Governor’s Environmental and Economic Leadership Award (GEELA). Del Sur was honored in the category of comprehensive land-use planning, which GEELA defines as a project demonstrating “social equity and adequate housing; cost-effective infrastructure and transportation; water and energy efficiencies; and open-space conservation to protect forests, agriculture, watersheds and other ecosystem values.”
It has long been Black Mountain Ranch’s vision that the architecture and design of Del Sur reflect a hometown lifestyle reminiscent of San Diego’s great historic neighborhoods.

The architecture of Del Sur’s neighborhoods incorporates such classic styles as California Bungalow, Spanish Colonial and Italian Revival, each characteristic of San Diego’s architectural past. Maas and the project’s lead architect and planner, Bill Dumka, spent weeks exploring Mission Hills, Kensington, Coronado and Rancho Santa Fe, as well as other historic neighborhoods.

“California Bungalow, Spanish Colonial and Italian Revival are all classic styles of San Diego’s architectural past.”

Respect for the natural environment is emphasized in all aspects of Del Sur. Maas, who chose several nationally noted builders for the community, is requiring “green building” from them in home construction. Guidelines call for at least 20 percent of the homes to incorporate photovoltaic (solar) energy, installation of energy-efficient appliances, natural ventilation systems, and use of nontoxic materials. Additionally, builders must install weather-based irrigation controls, a new technology that uses satellite-provided data to automatically match watering times to the weather and the needs of individual plants. BMR also had mandated that 75 percent of the development’s construction and demolition waste be recycled—25 percent more than required by the city—but it actually achieved more than 90 percent recycling. The community has twice been named San Diego’s Recycler of the Year.

Other key environmental features include construction of a reclaimed water pipeline system and reservoir as part of the irrigation system for Black Mountain Ranch’s common landscaped areas. This facility is an integral part of a comprehensive water conservation program, which includes a drought-resistant landscape theme, and will be available for integration into subregional water reclamation and reuse programs. A 25-million-gallon potable water storage facility also has been built for the region.


"California Bungalow, Spanish Colonial and Italian Revival are all classic styles of San Diego’s architectural past.”
A BRIGHT FUTURE

To make the vision complete, Del Sur has retained the renowned architectural firm of Robert A.M. Stern, whose namesake serves as the dean of the Yale School of Architecture.

Stern’s group has planned a traditional town square and main street experience with an adjoining village green at the center of Del Sur. Connected to the surrounding neighborhoods by paseos, trails or walkways, the town square is being designed to offer residents many activities as farmers’ markets, evening concerts and holiday celebrations. Also, many of Del Sur’s first neighborhoods will have a park, incorporating such features as pools, an entertainment amphitheater and children’s “tot lots.” In all respects, Del Sur will be a community—not merely a housing development with subdivisions.

“Development of Del Sur has been an evolutionary process, with many constituencies involved,” says Maas, President and CEO of Black Mountain Ranch LLC. “Everything we did underwent intense scrutiny. But the process worked—and 20 years in, I can say with conviction that we’re a better company for it.”

ABOUT THE AUTHOR:
A longtime San Diego resident, Margie Farnsworth is a former newspaper reporter, public relations executive and magazine editor. She is currently a freelance writer.

DEL SUR AWARDS LIST*

2008 MIXED USE DEVELOPMENT OF THE YEAR AWARD, presented May 2008 at the National Green Building Awards Competition by the National Association of Home Builders.

2008 SMART GROWTH CHAMPION OF THE YEAR from Urban Land Institute, San Diego/Tijuana chapter. Awarded to Fred Maas, President and CEO of Black Mountain Ranch LLC.

PACIFIC COAST BUILDERS CONFERENCE 2008 GOLD NUGGET “GRAND” AWARD - Best Sustainable Commercial/Industrial Development of the Year.

2007 GOVERNOR’S AWARD FOR ENVIRONMENTAL AND ECONOMIC LEADERSHIP (GEELA) from the state of California. Category: Comprehensive Land-Use Planning. Of the 18 GEELA winners this year, Del Sur was San Diego County’s only honoree (apart from a few statewide programs) and the only honoree in this category. November 2007.

- First private-enterprise, new-construction project in California to receive Platinum certification.
- One of only a handful of buildings of this kind in the world, second highest-rated of its kind in the United States as of Summer 2007.


2007 SUSTAINABLE COMMUNITIES CHAMPION, presented by San Diego Gas & Electric.

2007 SANDIEE (SAN DIEGO EXCELLENCE IN ENERGY) AWARDS, presented by the California Center for Sustainable Energy. March 2008.
- Special Achievement in Energy by a Small Business Award


2007 RECYCLER OF THE YEAR from the city of San Diego, which honored Del Sur for its community wide recycling campaign that resulted in more than 90 percent of construction waste being diverted from local landfills during 2006.

2007 CIVIL ENGINEERING PROJECT AWARD, presented by the American Society of Civil Engineers San Diego Sector, on May 2008.
- Outstanding Project – Del Sur Community at Black Mountain Ranch.

2007 PRESIDENT’S AWARD WINNER, American Society of Landscape Architects, San Diego Chapter.

2006 CIVIL ENGINEERING PROJECT AWARDS, presented May 2007 by the American Society of Civil Engineers, San Diego Section.
- Outstanding Project – Camino Del Sur Bridge over Lusardi Creek.

PACIFIC COAST BUILDERS CONFERENCE 2007 GOLD NUGGET “MERIT” AWARD - Community Site Plan (Phase One at Del Sur)
- Best Single-Family Detached home in size range (Kensington at Del Sur)


2006 RECYCLER OF THE YEAR from the city of San Diego, which honored Del Sur for its community wide recycling campaign that has resulted in more than 90 percent of construction waste being diverted from local landfills.

2006 SANDIEE (SAN DIEGO EXCELLENCE IN ENERGY) AWARDS, presented February 2007, by the San Diego Regional Energy Office.
- Runner-Up for the Special Achievement in Energy by a Small Business Award

2006 MAINE AWARD, presented March 2007, by the Building Industry Association of Southern California.
- Sustainable Community of the Year.
- Best Sales/Information Pavilion – Ranch House.

2006 USE OF PERVERSIVE AWARD for Sustainable Practices from the San Diego International Chapter American Concrete Institute.
- Awarded to Benchmark Contractors.
- Awarded to Black Mountain Ranch LLC for the Ranch House.

2007 NATIONALS AWARDS, presented by the National Sales and Marketing Council of the National Association of Home Builders.
- Gold Award, Best Sales Information Center for the Ranch House at Del Sur.

2006 CALIFORNIA-FRIENDLY CONSTRUCTION (Ranch House) for landscape installation exemplifying the principles of efficient water use. Awarded to Benchmark Landscape from the California Landscape Contractors Association.

2006 RECYCLER OF THE YEAR from the city of San Diego, which honored Del Sur for its community wide recycling campaign that has resulted in more than 90 percent of construction waste being diverted from local landfills.

2007 SANDIEE (SAN DIEGO EXCELLENCE IN ENERGY) AWARDS, presented February 2007, by the San Diego Regional Energy Office.
- Runner-Up for the Special Achievement in Energy by a Small Business Award

2006 CIVIL ENGINEERING PROJECT AWARDS, presented May 2007 by the American Society of Civil Engineers, San Diego Section.
- Outstanding Project – Camino Del Sur Bridge over Lusardi Creek.

PACIFIC COAST BUILDERS CONFERENCE 2007 GOLD NUGGET “MERIT” AWARD - Community Site Plan (Phase One at Del Sur)
- Best Single-Family Detached home in size range (Kensington at Del Sur)

2006 CALIFORNIA-FRIENDLY CONSTRUCTION (Ranch House) for landscape installation exemplifying the principles of efficient water use. Awarded to Benchmark Landscape from the California Landscape Contractors Association.

2006 RECYCLER OF THE YEAR from the city of San Diego, which honored Del Sur for its community wide recycling campaign that has resulted in more than 90 percent of construction waste being diverted from local landfills.

2006 SANDIEE (SAN DIEGO EXCELLENCE IN ENERGY) AWARDS, presented February 2007, by the San Diego Regional Energy Office.
- Runner-Up for the Special Achievement in Energy by a Small Business Award

2006 MAINE AWARD, presented March 2007, by the Building Industry Association of Southern California.
- Sustainable Community of the Year.
- Best Sales/Information Pavilion – Ranch House.

2006 USE OF PERVERSIVE AWARD for Sustainable Practices from the San Diego International Chapter American Concrete Institute.
- Awarded to Benchmark Contractors.
- Awarded to Black Mountain Ranch LLC for the Ranch House.

2007 NATIONALS AWARDS, presented by the National Sales and Marketing Council of the National Association of Home Builders.
- Gold Award, Best Sales Information Center for the Ranch House at Del Sur.

* A complete listing of awards can be found at www.del-surliving.com