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[How a tiny Utah community fought off an LDS Church housing project and lost a temple](#)

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Body

Erda • It seemed like a fairly typical development dispute between a big-time landowner and existing neighbors over high-density housing in a corner of Utah seeing lots of growing pains these days.

But this time, the developer was The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, and this time, real estate executives for the state's predominant faith blinked, scrapping a proposal to carve a master-planned community out of open farmland along Highway 36 in Erda and relocating an announced temple in the process.

It's not often the Salt Lake City-based faith moves a temple once the site is unveiled, especially in its home state and in a community where so many of the residents are members.

While neighborhood opposition surfaced among even faithful Latter-day Saints over the church's plans to expand its flagship Missionary Training Center in Provo — compromises eventually were reached — those buildings were not temples, where devout members participate in their religion's most sacred rites.

Even rarer The faith's top leaders spoke up at several turns in the Erda land quarrel, with statements from church President Russell M. Nelson and his counselors in the governing First Presidency aimed at soothing community divisions.

In shifting from a Tooele Valley Temple in Erda to a like-designed Deseret Peak Temple in nearby Tooele, the leaders voiced a "sincere desire on the part of the church to avoid discord in the community" and encouraged all people to treat one another with kindness and Christlike love.

That outcome came just shy of a year of community controversy over the issue, including a hotly debated ballot petition, months of caustic comments and allegations on social media, and other pain that has left residents with a lot to get over.

Community activists in Erda say they also hope to heal, but add that while the temple project has shifted five minutes down the road and the housing piece is gone, many of issues that sparked the disagreements remain.

"Erda has always been looked at as a cash cow for these developers," said Kathleen Mallis, a longtime resident and Latter-day Saint who, like many, opposed the high-density housing plans from Suburban Land Reserve, a real estate arm of the church, but not the temple.

"We're just one little community that's always been rural," she said, "and we want to stay that way."

Mallis said she and others are seeking a growth moratorium on the heels of the temple's departure and reversals on other high-profile developments — until town leaders enact a 2020 vote by residents to incorporate Erda.

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Others see opposition to growth in Erda as a knee-jerk pattern, from relative newcomers to the community who now want to bar more residents coming in, and that the temple was a needless casualty in that debate.

Many church members and even nonmembers who embraced the first temple site now say they feel more than a little heartbroken at losing it to their larger neighbor, along with the walkable residential community and inviting green spaces once envisioned surrounding the new sanctuary.

“That would have been such a beautiful area, and it would have been a nice park to take the grandkids to,” said Erda resident Chuck McCown. “I was really looking forward to it.”

A church spokesperson declined a request for comment for this story, saying “we don’t have anything new to add.”

One of Utah’s 25 LDS temples

Initial word of Tooele County’s first Latter-day Saint temple came from Nelson during the April 2019 General Conference. It will be one of 25 built or planned temples in Utah.

Reports surfaced later that the Tooele Valley Temple might be fast-tracked for completion by the end of 2021, due of the closure of the Salt Lake Temple for renovation until 2024.

Early hints at the exact Erda site came in July 2019, when the owner of the popular Virg’s Diner near the intersection of Highway 36 and Erda Way learned church officials had bought the building and adjoining acreage and put him on a month-to-month lease. Church officials then announced the site, a large farm field akin to Erda’s front yard coming off the highway, two months later.

In April 2020, after their first all-virtual spring conference due to the coronavirus pandemic, church officials released renderings of the three-story, 70,000-square-foot temple’s exterior and interior. As though teasing their bigger announcement to come the next month, church officials revealed the building would be designed in beautiful cast stone with copper shingles, its style a nod to the pioneer past, with touches of cliffrose and silvery lupine, two native flowers.

Bill Williams, director of temple design, said at the time the renderings “depict the care and attention to detail that will go into the construction of this House of the Lord.”

Church proposes a large housing project

The housing thunderbolt came May 5, especially for many Erda residents who — determined to keep the township of nearly 3,000 people a quiet quilt of farm fields and homes on large lots — already had opposed a series of land developments in Tooele County.

Suburban Land Reserve called for a 167-acre pedestrian-oriented community at that key intersection around the proposed temple, with 446 units ranging from single-family homes on nearly half-acre lots to densely built town houses and 54 units of senior housing, all interspersed with open spaces, trails and parks.

Steve Romney, president of Suburban Land Reserve, said the residential addition would contribute vital utilities such as sewer and water lines around the temple, making them “economically and functionally viable.”

In addition to infrastructure, Romney said, “this community will help protect the temple and create a place where people can enjoy the setting of this sacred building in ways that are important and meaningful to them.”

The company said if the Tooele County Commission signed off on the plan and the rezoning, it would “engage leading local and regional homebuilders to construct the proposed community.”

Traffic, other development fears surface

Commuters in Tooele County rely heavily on the north-south Highway 36 corridor, especially with a sizable share of the population venturing to the Salt Lake Valley each day.

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So, not surprisingly, traffic congestion topped the list of worries over the development. Plus, many Erda residents rely on septic systems and well water and some worried about being forced to connect someday to new sewer and water systems instead. Pressure on schools came up, too, along with retaining the community's rural identity.

Fearing those impacts, project opponents quickly stepped up to fight the high-density proposal — even if it posed, for some, a perceived conflict with their church.

“It wasn't an easy position to take for myself,” said Monica Kennedy, an Erda resident and devout Latter-day Saint who was thrilled at news of the temple but opposed the housing development and helped organize signature-gathering campaigns against it.

“There have definitely been some problems among neighbors through all of this, especially when it's fueled by social media,” said Kennedy.

“I was sad that it caused such discord, and I was really disappointed we couldn't come to a good resolution through the whole process,” she said, though she's now celebrating the Tooele site, too, along with the prospect of moving on.

Much of the contention that pushed out first the housing and then the temple seems to have hinged on a simple question: Were the temple and the housing around it a package deal? Could residents, including faithful Latter-day Saints, who otherwise would welcome the sacred structure on their side of the Oquirrh, resist one and not the other?

Those involved disagree to this day.

Was the housing a deal-breaker?

Tooele resident Richard Droubay is a Latter-day Saint whose ancestors homesteaded in Erda and has seen the landscape “change dramatically, and it continues to change. The Salt Lake Valley's full. Utah County is almost full. So it's got to go somewhere. Like it or not, we're going to have it.”

The 72-year-old spent part of last summer as temple groundbreaking chairman for the church, a public face in support of the Erda temple and housing plans, along with their benefits for the community. He said “the statements were very, very clear that it was one project. It wasn't two separate projects.”

Tying sewer lines from Erda north to systems near Stansbury Park “was going to cost at least \$13 million,” Droubay recalled. Without a critical mass of residents around the temple, the project's finances were less likely to pencil, Suburban Land Reserve executives told him. And yet, he said, some signature gatherers were giving out “a clouded message” that incorrectly divided the two in some people's minds.

“There's no question that happened,” Droubay said.

Ryan Sorensen, also of Erda, has championed the town becoming a city and was a leading voice against the idea that the temple and the housing development had to be built together. As a land developer himself, former member of the county's Planning Commission and an ecclesiastical leader in the bishopric of his Latter-day Saint congregation, some say his opinions carried weight.

Sorensen said while putting the temple with the high-density housing would have been far easier for developers and lowered utility costs, it was never an actual physical requirement. Other options — including adding more single-family homes to the development — were never fully discussed with community members, he said.

The temple, meanwhile, was guaranteed approval anyway under federal protections for religious freedom, Sorensen said. So he wonders about Suburban Land Reserve's insistence that the holy building had to be bundled, at least in the public mind, with a for-profit development.

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“There’s a moral conundrum in coming into a community and doing what I view as leveraging a religious edifice, which can’t be denied,” Sorensen said, “with the housing development, which is clearly in conflict with what the community wants.”

Mallis, with the Erda Community Association, said the group put out feelers several times, trying to distinguish the sentiment of church leaders from those of their developers as opposition to the housing side of the plan grew.

“We were always referred back to our local leadership,” she said. And while that confusion persisted at the time, Mallis said, “we later learned it wouldn’t be cost effective for them to build the temple without a huge development that brought water and sewer to it.”

“We don’t know that the First Presidency was aware of all this going on,” she said, “but when they did learn of it, they said, ‘We don’t go anywhere where we’re not welcome.’ And it wasn’t that they weren’t welcome. The issue was, building on one-acre lots. That’s what we wanted.”

Temple finds a new home

Four days before the final deadline for referendum petition signatures in August, Droubay warned in a story published in the church-owned *Deseret News* the project was “one package for the whole thing” and again called the the temple and walkable community “inseparable.”

The referendum, he added, could “very well delay or alter the ultimate decision to have a temple.”

Then, on Aug. 18, the Tooele County clerk confirmed community opponents had secured enough signatures for a referendum — despite some residents pulling their names at the last minute, with claims they’d been deceived.

Church leaders pulled the plug the same day on the housing plans, saying they would withdraw their application for the adjacent development whether or not the referendum went ahead.

“We acknowledge the efforts of those who have raised questions and sincere concerns about the Tooele Valley Temple project, including the residential development surrounding the temple,” the First Presidency stated. “There is a sincere desire on the part of the church to avoid discord in the community. ...We hope those from all viewpoints on this matter will treat one another with kindness, civility, and Christlike love.”

But church officials also then seemed to split the housing and the temple projects, adding that they would “work with local officials and community members to determine the next steps to move forward for construction of the temple itself.”

Tooele County Commissioner Tom Tripp insists the entire Erda project was dead at that point. “It was all done in one fell swoop,” he recalled. “They just waited to announce the new [temple] location, even though that decision had been made.”

Droubay confirmed “everything went silent after that withdrawal.

“At that point, it was really extremely contentious,” he said. “And that’s when the First Presidency, particularly President Nelson, just said, ‘Call it off. We’re done. We’re not going to do this. We don’t work in an atmosphere of contention.’”

But Droubay also said he didn’t learn until October the first location was off the table and that the church had opted to move the temple to an incorporated area with existing city services.

Sure enough, in January, “after considering current circumstances and opportunities,” church leaders announced a new spot for the temple west of the intersection of 2400 North 400 West in Tooele City, to the delight of many residents and elected officials there.

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Mayor Debbie Winn said last week she has received “no negative comments or concerns on the temple location,” which is west of Highway 36 near Overlake Golf Course. That area is already zoned for housing, although the surrounding acreage is not under church ownership, including land held by Utah residential developer Perry Homes.

The city hasn't seen a formal application yet for the temple project, which, according to Tooele's community development director, Jim Bolser, will require a conditional use permit — though city officials have already lifted a building height limit in that neighborhood ahead of church plans reaching City Hall.

Bolser wrote in an email that it appeared homebuilding around the temple will “be left to private developers and property owners rather than being more of an integrated part of the temple project.”

The mayor said Tooele also has a new general land-use plan in place, “which will help us to manage the growth.” She and Bolser said there did not appear to be any issues with extending city services to the new location.

“Growth will come whether we like it or not,” Winn said. “Being able to manage it and stay ahead will always be a challenge.”

And with Erda facing a legal challenge filed in December to block its incorporation — as well as fresh land disputes in and around the bucolic town — defenders of its rural side say they aren't slowing down either, even in a fight to stay the same.

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