

Hospitality at Rancho Merlita

> *bed and breakfasts are planned at former Merle Norman estate* <

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People may be able to pay to stay at the former Tucson ranch house of cosmetics legend Merle Norman as soon as November, under the owners' plan to turn it into a bed and breakfast. Tucson architect Diana Osborne and her husband John bought the northeast-side house and its surrounding 13 acres from Norman's longtime assistant/secretary Tom Dixon in 2004. Her first thought was to turn it into a bed and breakfast but then she "teeter-tottered" with the idea of living there herself, she said.

Unable to bear parting with her current Fort Lowell Historic District home, she's returned to plan A.

"It definitely was destined to return to a similar use to what it was built for. It was originally built as kind of a guest ranch facility for Merle Norman to entertain her employees and business associates," Osborne said of the estate, which was built in the 1950s.

Osborne wants to turn the estate's ranch house and guest house into two bed-and-breakfast facilities, which requires the company to apply for special exception to the zoning and receive the city zoning examiner's approval.

The two bed and breakfasts would be separate businesses and the city is handling the zoning requests for each as two different cases.

The main house, which would be called El Rancho Merlita Ranch House Bed and Breakfast, is at 1924 N. Corte El Rancho Merlita. The former guest house, which would be called El Rancho Merlita Arroyo House Bed and Breakfast, is at 1937 N. Corte El Rancho Merlita.

Both are located within Rancho Merlita, a subdivision Osborne's company created on the estate land after buying it from Dixon. It's at 8520 E. Wrightstown Road — south of Wrightstown, between North Sarnoff Drive and North Camino Seco.

John and Janet Horsman, who live near the estate but not within the subdivision, think turning the vacant houses into bed and breakfasts is a good idea.

"It's far better than them being empty," John Horsman said. He also said he doesn't think having a bed and breakfast nearby would be too noisy.

The city's Design Review Board on July 17 reviewed the new zoning requests that would allow for the proposed bed and breakfasts. The board unanimously voted in favor of both with the conditions that outdoor activities at the ranch house and mechanical equipment at the arroyo house be screened in.

El Rancho Merlita held a required neighborhood meeting on both proposed bed and breakfasts two days earlier. About 15 to 25 people attended, said Osborne and her daughter Valerie Osborne, who is the company's administrative assistant.

People will have another opportunity to give their input as part of the city's formal process. After city staff make a complete formal review, the zoning examiner will hold a public hearing on the request, said Michael Wyneken, a principal planner for the city. A date for a hearing on each bed and breakfast hasn't been set yet.

Osborne hopes to open El Rancho Merlita Ranch House Bed and Breakfast a week before El Tour de Tucson in November. The house has five bedrooms, one of which would be used by a live-in innkeeper.

A maximum of eight guests at a time could stay there, no longer than 14 days. They would be able to use the estate's community-sized pool. Osborne also plans to include other amenities such as croquet and other outdoor games, a game room, massage therapy, yoga, a stargazing patio and exercise equipment.

Osborne doesn't plan to open the Arroyo House Bed and Breakfast until mid- to late January. The facilities will not be available for events such as weddings. Children younger than 12 and pets wouldn't be allowed at them under the company's current plan. If that changes, pets would only be allowed to stay at one of the two, according to the minutes from the July 15 neighborhood meeting.

Kimberly Schmitz, director of communications and public relations for the Metropolitan Tucson Convention and Visitors Bureau, said she thinks the proposed bed and breakfasts are going to be first-rate.

There are visitors that prefer just about every type of accommodation, she said. "It's nice to see the variety growing in our destinations."