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Rancho Laguna Project Stalled

By Sophie Braccini



Rancho Laguna Layout presented at the meeting Photo Sophie Braccini

The Planning Commission sent the Rancho Laguna housing development project that has been under study for years back to the drawing board, on the evening that could have seen its Environmental Impact Report (EIR) adopted. Now there is no chance that the project will be adopted before the people of Moraga vote on the two land-use initiatives that are on the November ballot.

The single question that allowed the Commission to reject the EIR was asked by Planning Commissioner Bruce Whitley, "Is the project compliant with the General Plan?"

In a document sent earlier by Planning Director Lori Salamack to the Commission, she explained her concerns about the compliance of the project with the General Plan. She focused on the homes that were proposed to be built along Rheem Boulevard: "The General Plan provides direction regarding minimum lot sizes... (it) requires larger lot sizes if necessary to mitigate negative visual impacts and/or geologic hazards." She explained that the lots on Rheem Boulevard are subject to both geological hazards and negative visual impacts. Salamack wrote, "The Planning Commission may find it necessary to increase the minimum lot area along Rheem Boulevard so as to mitigate the negative visual impacts." The Commission debated the issue and agreed that due to the visual impact on Rheem Boulevard the plans did not satisfy the minimum lot size requirement of the General Plan.

The Commission could still have supported the project by approving a statement of overriding consideration.

A financial contribution offered by Rancho Laguna L.L.C. to repair Rheem Boulevard could have been such a consideration.

A company representative stated that \$500,000 would be the maximum contribution they were prepared to make toward the repairs. Jill Mercurio, Town Engineer and Public Works Director, evaluated the total cost of the restoration at

\$2.7 million. The Commission decided there were not enough elements to approve a statement of overriding consideration.

The Commission could then have approved the project with no development on Rheem Boulevard and only the construction of 21 homes on the southern plateau. The developer stated that under that circumstance Rancho Laguna L.L.C. would not make any contribution toward the repairs on Rheem Boulevard, except to provide soil from the excavations to consolidate the road.

The Commission chose to send the project back to the developer with instructions to reduce the number of homes along Rheem to six, on larger lots to be consistent with the General Plan.

In the meantime, Moraga residents will have voted for the land use initiatives on the ballot. If Measure J passes, or neither J nor K passes, nothing will change for Rancho Laguna L.L.C. On the other hand, if K passes the land in question will be rezoned to MOSO 2008, which will require a lower density; at 20 units per acre, the 180 acre property would accommodate only 9 dwellings.

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