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Planning Commission Discusses Palos Colorados

By *Sophie Braccini*

During the February 2nd meeting of the Planning Commission, the Commissioners had their plate stacked with a very tall order: approving the Precise Development Plan of the Palos Colorados project, a bite they decided was too big to chew in one meeting.

During the discussion with Lori Salamack, Moraga Planning Director, the Commissioners seemed surprised to realize that some decisions had already been made, during previous steps of the process, that were now tying their hands. In addition, a question was raised regarding whether several proposed secondary units could be counted by the Town towards its affordable housing requirement. Moragans may recall that the issue of affordable housing was a major component of last fall's debate between two competing land use initiatives.

The course that was embarked upon some 20 years ago should be in its final phase leading to the construction of 123 homes and possibly 30 secondary units on a piece of land being developed by the Richfield Development Corporation. The Precise Development Plan included the design plans of seven units that would have been approved if the Commission had agreed to it, allowing future homeowners to build these homes without having to submit their project to the Design Review Board.

The Commissioners were uncertain of the magnitude of what was being asked of them that night. "What are we approving and not approving tonight?" asked Commissioner Allen Sayles.

Commissioner Lee Hays questioned the size of the homes that were included in the map, "62% of the homes are over 5000 square feet and, as you enter the development, eleven in a row have a second floor," he said, "we need staff to compare this development with the town's design guidelines before we make a decision."

"We were asked to approve a great deal in one meeting," said Margaret Goglia, Planning Commission Chair, "there was not enough information given by staff for us to make an informed decision at that time."

The Commissioners were particularly cautious having learned that one of their previous decisions had consequences that reached farther than they had anticipated. During the discussions, Richfield Development stated it had no obligation to comply with the Build it Green guidelines that the Town had passed. The vesting tentative map of the project had been approved prior to the adoption of the guidelines, thereby grandfathering the project.

Goglia said, "The fact that the developer will not have to consider the green building guidelines that the town has adopted was a surprise to us. When we adopted the vesting map, we were under the impression that specifics, such as energy conserving requirements, would be discussed at a later time in the process."

Goglia suggested that the Commission may not have been completely informed as to the level of their approval. Town staff and legal counsel were asked to research the issue and report back to the Commission on the applicability of the Town's green building guidelines.

The last surprise of the evening was the discovery by the public in attendance that the secondary units that are proposed in the project may not be of great use in helping the town reach its required share of affordable housing. "Secondary

units could count toward moderate units," said Salamack, "the State decides."

The commissioners asked that a joint meeting with the design review board be held to study the general compliance of the project and that staff report on it as well. That meeting was scheduled to be held on February 17th, after press time.

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