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Town Center III Moving Forward

By Cathy Tyson

In a meeting last week that was meant to test the waters about architectural adjustments made on the proposed multi-story condominium project Town Center III, Design Review Commissioners generally liked the way the building is evolving.

Developer KB Home South Bay continues to informally address City concerns about the size of the building and landscaping prior to their formal application. The developer, along with a team of architects and staff, met with the Planning Commission in September of 2009 to gather feedback on the structure and gauge support about going forward with the project - 82 condominium units on 1.47 acres behind Panda Express on what is now a gravel parking lot.

"We've made significant changes we hope a lot of you will recognize. We've also hired an artist to work with the landscape designer," said Ray Panek, Senior Vice President of KB Home South Bay.

Jeffrey Heller, of Heller Manus Architects, had prepared three-dimensional computer generated illustrations that highlighted the overall reduction in size of the building. Working to fit the project to the site, he said it now "fits into the vocabulary of the existing building (neighboring condos) and doesn't compete with the setting."

The originally proposed towers were eliminated, and entire chunks of the building from all four corners were removed as a result of prior meeting complaints that the structure was straining at the boundaries of the site. The pathway to BART with adjacent oak woodland open space remains, although in this iteration an enlarged plaza and sculpture park anchor the southeast corner of the project, behind Pizza Antica.

Looking to encourage social interaction, a large sculpture, seating area and rock outcroppings are planned for that edge of the property. In addition, large oak trees to create a transition between building and parking lot have been added. Bill Smith, of Smith and Smith Landscape Architects, explains they want to "enrich, enliven and enhance" an art-focused landscape environment.

Newly hired artist Ben Trautman drew his inspiration from the large oaks on the property for his sculptures. He wanted something dramatic, yet not a literal interpretation - an abstraction of a tree canopy for the larger of the two installations.

Even as plans morphed in reaction to the first round of constructive criticism, concerns remain from both the Design Review Committee and residents. "In general, I'm pleased with everything presented, all this is excellent, brilliant art concepts, but I'd like to see more integration of the creek and path, public and private space," said Commissioner Ken Hertel. Commissioner Bob Cleaver was, "Concerned about the articulation of the building," but added, "The sculptures are a great gift to the city."

Echoing resident's worries, Planning Commissioner Tom Chastain was still concerned with the south elevation - the side that will be adjacent to existing parking and the rear of retail shops, "I just think it's too tall on the south edge." Marie Blitz, President of the Board of Directors of the Lafayette Homeowners Council, was troubled with the size, mass, height and unbroken facade, "It's still an enormous structure for Lafayette." She would like to see story poles erected.

"How does this reflect Lafayette's character?" asked Guy Atwood. He wants more information on parking and circulation in and out of the building. He'd also like to see the overall height reduced by ten to twelve feet.

Going forward another study session is planned for August 24, according to Panek. KB Home has an internal deadline of mid-September. They plan to make a formal building application to Lafayette in the beginning of October.

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