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Burton Valley Remodel Denied

By Cathy Tyson



Front elevation of proposed addition to 623 Lucas Drive in Burton Valley. Drawing courtesy of Hertel Architects

area. "However, the proposed residence maintains a number of characteristics that are consistent with existing California Ranch homes, such as low pitched roof, garage serving as integral portion of residence, and large porches and patios," according to the October 18 staff report on the matter. Their recommendation was to deny the appeal and uphold the Design Review Commission's conditional approval.

The real issue both the Planning Commission and Design Review struggled with was consistency with the existing neighborhood. Every house in this original section of Burton Valley, now over fifty years old, has only one story. Appellant Wahlander requested that the Planning Commission deny the project because the "structure is incompatible with the existing neighborhood," basically double the height of surrounding homes. Scores of neighbors concurred and wrote letters to document their objections about height and mass.

"This neighborhood is a treasure," opined architect and resident Bill Marquand, "Lafayette needs to protect its historic resources." He described an approval as opening the gate to a potential domino effect. One neighbor said it was ten pounds of house on a five pound lot.

Although many neighbors came forward to oppose the project, some were in favor - citing that it would add variety and the respectful, careful plans made a home that is currently an eyesore - beautiful. Another said, "The train has left the station - look around Burton Valley, there are lots of remodels. We need to encourage such a good design."

At one point, the suggestion of trading one or more backyard trees to accommodate the additional square footage of moving the proposed second story to the ground floor was floated. Also the concept of shifting the upper floor addition behind the street-facing roof line was discussed briefly; but neither idea was embraced.

Despite input from architect Ken Hertel that the project met all zoning requirements, the overall size of the second floor addition was reduced by 23%, and plans were designed to mimic the style of the neighborhood, Planning Commissioners weren't completely swayed.

After prolonged public testimony, Commissioners wrestled with a decision. Commissioner Karen Maggio noted, "This is tough, I can appreciate the struggle," but explained that she was concerned that strict neighborhood design vernacular could stagnate the area and not allow for individuality.

"It's a complicated issue," said Chair Thomas Chastain, "both abstract and concrete." He was concerned about compatibility - and what that really means, as well as concrete issues like privacy and intrusion. "Does one (additional) story make it different and therefore bad? I think it's reasonable to believe that change comes."

"The ball is now in the homeowner's court," said Assistant Planner Michael Cass. He explained the Planning Commission decision can be appealed to the City Council or the project can be scaled back.

Who knew a remodel in Burton Valley could be so controversial? The modest ranch style home at 623 Lucas Drive had been discussed at four Design Review Commission meetings and ultimately was conditionally approved on September 13, 2010. However neighbors William Wahlander and John Woolery really did not like the idea of a second story addition in the neighborhood, so they appealed the conditional approval of the Design Review decision to the more powerful Planning Commission on October 18, 2010. After hours of public testimony, and statements by the architect and Wahlander, the Planning Commission granted for the appellant on a four to two vote. This action overrides the conditional approval by the Design Review Commission.

At issue is a single story 1,612 square foot home with a 600 square foot garage built in 1956. The new owner wanted to enlarge the garage by 120 feet, add 733 square feet to the main floor and a 1,210 foot second story addition - making the total gross floor area including the garage 4,273 square feet according to the latest slightly reduced project plans. Because the lot was constrained with a number of mature trees - the only option was to go mostly up.

City planning staff agreed that the project altered the existing neighborhood by being the first two-story home in the immediate

Homeowner Joe Polichio is disappointed, "I'm just a guy trying to build his American dream." He cautions other potential remodelers, "Burton Valley buyers beware; your property rights and home values have been compromised."

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