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## Moraga Developments Move Forward

By Sophie Braccini

It was a very good two weeks for those who want to see more rooftops and more action in Moraga. The Planning Commission acted on two proposals that affect very visible and historic locations, while on January 26th the Town Council approved a plan to construct 27 residences on the hills of Moraga.

Although probably not the beginning of a huge construction spree, these projects are likely to have a significant impact on the future development of the town; the beginnings of revitalization can be expected, while some residents remain concerned that the approval of buildings on, or too close to, ridge lines is a dangerous precedent for a town that cherishes its open views.

**Downtown Area Projects in the Planning Phase**

On the night of January 18th, the Planning Commission discussed one proposed project on Moraga Road, across from the Rheem Center, and approved another at the historic Barn, which is at the corner of Viader and Country Club Drive. The projects are very different in nature and stage of development, but if they materialize as proposed they have the potential to significantly contribute to the revitalization of the downtown area. "This was one of the best Planning Commission meetings of my life," said Planning Director Lori Salamack after the fact, "We have a very talented and experienced Planning Commission and they did a superb job."

Chris Avant, who presented a modification of his Barn-café project, appeared to be touched by the number of people who came to the meeting in his support. Members of the Lamorinda Wine Growers Association, the president of the Chamber of Commerce, a local architect, and residents, all spoke in support of Avant's plan to have the ground floor of the building open from 6:00 a.m. to midnight, offering healthy finger foods and wine-tasting. The Planning Commission voted almost unanimously to support the project. Commissioner Bruce Whitley opposed the project on the basis of parking concerns.

"I am invigorated by the support of the community," said Avant after the meeting, "and I plan to open the Barn to the public during the summer of 2011." Last year Avant received approval to open a wine bar in the Barn from 4:00 p.m. to midnight. An extension of the permitted hours, and appealing to different groups of customers, made sense to Avant as he developed his business plan. "This will invigorate the businesses in this part of town and will hopefully be beneficial (to existing businesses)," said Avant.

Jim Knuppe, along with his sons and his architect, followed Avant with a presentation of his project. The Knuppe family owns the barren two-acre lot adjacent to its 5A Rent-A-Space storage facility on Moraga Road; the lot is currently zoned "agricultural only," and Knuppe was on a scouting expedition to find out if a plan to build an apartment/condominium complex on the site stood a chance of being approved. The Commission raised concerns about peak hour traffic, pedestrian flow and overflow parking for residents; but agreed that such a development made sense, indicating that Knuppe's first priority should be to have the area re-zoned.

The 40 units proposed by the Knuppe family would be one or two bedroom condos/apartments stacked on three levels with a parking garage on the first floor- the concept was presented as a housing option for Saint Mary's students, staff and the local workforce. According to the Knuppes, this is the only viable solution for the property. "We've studied everything," said Jim Knuppe during the study session with the Commission, "the market in Moraga could not support a hotel, and more retail, in view of existing empty spaces, does not make economic sense." The Planning Commissioners agreed with Knuppe; Commission Chair Jim Obsitnik added "if we want a vibrant retail, we need more people."

**Rancho Laguna Project Approved**

On January 26th the Town Council approved, by a vote of 2-1, the development of 27 homes on the hilly property known as Rancho Laguna along Rheem Boulevard. A previous approval by the Planning Commission in August of 2009 was appealed by a group of residents who challenged its consistency with the General Plan. Their position was that some of the homes would significantly alter the natural setting, not to mention being located too close to ridge lines. Almost a year and a half of discussions and iterations brought forward a much-modified project. "I think that most people will be pleased when they look at the concessions that were made on both sides," said Town Manager Jill Keimach after the meeting.

Rancho Laguna is a 180-acre property located on the eastern section of Rheem Boulevard, towards Saint Mary's Road, where cows now roam. The approved development consists of eight homes along Rheem Boulevard, and 19 on the upper plateau located on the south-east portion of the lot.

Along the road to approval various aspects of the projects have been addressed, including the preservation of the creek, the removal of an access road that impacted the creek, and the visual impact of the project.

Moraga resident Suzanne Jones, speaking on behalf of the appellant group, indicated that the modified project presented by staff could be acceptable, in spite of remaining concerns, if one specific lot was moved. That lot, located on the southeastern side of the upper plateau, is located on or very close to what the group considers to be a ridge line.

Dave Trotter was the only Council member to oppose the new plan, and did so on the basis that the location of the one controversial lot was not compliant with the General Plan; Mayor Karen Mendonca and Council Member Howard Harpham approved the plan. Vice-Mayor Mike Metcalf and Council Member Ken Chew had to recuse themselves from the discussion since they live too close to the proposed development.

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