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Townhomes a Possibility at Hungry Hunter Site

By Cathy Tyson

Although Jack and Audie Dudum still own the Hungry Hunter property at the corner of Pleasant Hill Road and Mt. Diablo, Signature Properties has an option to purchase it. The developer is looking for some direction prior to beginning the permitting process to see if its proposed twenty-three townhomes will be a good fit for Lafayette. As a recent Planning Commission meeting Signature Properties participated in a study session along with the Design Review Commission to gather feedback on a proposed plan for the three to four bedroom units in three stories, two levels over a garage on the parcel.

The acre and a half parcel has been for sale for quite a while - although there was some initial interest from Bev Mo, In and Out Burger, and a medical building - none have followed through.

Signature Properties is looking into a new layout of the townhomes arranged surrounding a central garden courtyard with the front doors and garages facing into the shared community area. Project Manager Tom Quaglia thanked the Commission and explained this study session, "really helps;" comments from a prior study session drove a significant design change from outward street facing homes to this new iteration that turns inward.

While the parcel can be called a gateway to the city it also has unusual zoning - sandwiched on the east and west sides by two and three story office buildings, lower density residential to the south and southeast and a small area of multifamily residential on the southwest corner that is accessed by Mt. Diablo Court; Highway 24 is on the northern edge and the cemetery is just a couple of blocks down Mt. Diablo.

The very preliminary design has darker colors to blend into the neighborhood and is tucked in much like the existing Hungry Hunter building to make for a subtle transition. Existing mature redwood trees and landscaping around the perimeter would shield the development from some of the freeway noise.

Although there was some discussion of a podium building, which would be taller and much more of a statement, many of the Commissioners weren't in favor of that option - "A different animal altogether," it would have substantial parking on the ground level and townhomes above producing a more "urban" feel and limiting open space to decks.

Noise was another concern brought up by resident George Wilson; he was concerned about the ambient noise level from the freeway and traffic on Mt. Diablo. Quaglia commented, "I don't think the noise issue is insurmountable," and described projects they have done fronting busy El Camino Real.

Planning Commissioners had differing opinions and consistently declared "it depends" since a more finalized architectural proposal is not before the group, but most seemed to generally support the project. Many commented on the importance of the site as a gateway, "This is our front door and it needs to set the tone," said Planning Commissioner Karen Maggio.

"Direction was provided to the applicant," said Planning and Building Services Manager Niroop Srivatsa. Now it's up to Signature Properties to weigh the options about going forward. The City can still approve or deny the project or ask for significant amendments.

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