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Changes Coming to the West End

By Cathy Tyson

Lafayette's west end is slowly but surely growing, care of Branagh Development. Three projects are in the pipeline at various stages of approval along Mt. Diablo Boulevard: Eco Vive West - located at the corner of Risa Road and Mt. Diablo just across the street from the Veterans Hall, the Woodbury on the site of the former Hillside Motel, and an approved office building affectionately known as 3722 Mt. Diablo. "When all three projects are built, they will certainly change the look of the west end of our downtown for the better," said Planning and Building Services Manager Niroop Srivatsa.

Each project has its own unique challenges. The most prominent of the trio, the Woodbury - luxury residential condominiums - was approved back in 2007, but due to the downturn in the economy and difficulty securing financing, it was placed on hold. Plans have recently been revised from 65-units down to 55-units spread throughout seven separate buildings that will be built in phases with private parking.

"It all started in 2005-2006 when we were working on the Hidden Oaks property," said Matt Branagh, Head of Entitlement and Land Acquisition, located near Pleasant Hill Road and Olympic Boulevard. "We saw tons of empty nesters coming through who were all looking to downsize."

Architectural rendering of one of the buildings that will comprise the Woodbury, a luxury condominium project by Ward Young Architects of Lafayette. Image provided



He explained the Woodbury's one-level condos at just under 2,000 square feet - mainly two bedrooms, 2 1/2 bath units - are directed to move down buyers, ready for a change after years of maintaining a single family home. The generous size and expansive outdoor patios and decks are meant to accommodate large family gatherings for easy entertaining.

Attention to detail is a Branagh hallmark; plans include "over the top finishes" throughout. "Our biggest concern was sound insulation, so we hired a top notch acoustical sound engineer to make units as sound proof as possible," explained Branagh.

The project was well received back in 2007, and at a recent study session for the revised iteration by Scott Thomsen of Ward Young Architects with Design Review, commissioners were equally positive, calling it efficient, livable and nicely scaled. Chair Ken Hertel found the new version "a fantastic re-birth....it will certainly dress up a hillside that has been lacking for some time."

What next? After the Woodbury project, "We looked at the surrounding properties for opportunities to further enhance the neighborhood," said Branagh. Less than a block away was the vacant northwest corner of Risa Road and Mt. Diablo Boulevard. Named after green building principles, and including reclaimed lumber on the exterior, Eco Vive West is the proposed three-story, 9,800 square foot office building slated for the site. The project has been before the Design Review Commission three times to date for study sessions. "A Development Agreement is being drafted for the City Council's consideration," said Srivatsa, which would finalize approval of using the City's Right of Way on the corner.

"This will be a joint venture with the city - we will be improving the entire site. The Veterans Building only has 43 parking spots - the new project doubles that," said Branagh. The parking lot will be available for overflow parking serving the Veterans Hall and Temple Isaiah. After completing some market research, there appeared to be a need for a medical facility with handicap accessible parking- Branagh anticipates tenants will use the building for medical offices. Designed to be subordinate to Veteran's Hall, and maintain the view corridor when driving into town from the west end, the modern take on a classic barn was a winner with Design commissioners who commented they, "appreciate repeated refinements" on the "simple quiet structure" and called it, "humble without diminishing quality." Credit the creativity of Scott Thomsen once again of Ward, Young Architects here in Lafayette.

Finally, located on a long and narrow, bow-tie shaped parcel, just east of the Veterans Hall parking lot, sits 3722 Mt. Diablo. Like Branagh's other projects on the west end, it's also designed by Ward Young Architects, similarly it's had some design adjustments along the way. It was recently sold to a Lafayette business, the new owners plan to start construction soon.

About the Developer

Now in its fourth generation in the Bay Area, the Branagh family has always been active in construction and development. Matt Branagh's great grandfather, John Branagh, came from Ireland just after the turn of the century. According to Matt he obtained, at the ripe old age of 21, the 13th contractor's license issued by the State of California in 1919. John's son Charlie grew up in the business and returned to work after being discharged from the

Army in 1945 after the war - running Branagh Inc., based in Oakland, until the early '90s before handing the business over to his sons Tom - who is now President, and Bill, now retired, who was the Treasurer. Charlie's son, Peter Branagh, decided in 1986 to found Branagh Development - more of a boutique development firm, headquartered in Danville. There was never a doubt for Matt Branagh, who was raised in Moraga and says he spent his summers as a kid sweeping floors and weed-whacking at family construction projects. Matt and his brother, Mike, recently established MB Realty Group.

Reach the reporter at: cathy@lamorindaweekly.com

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