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Hetfield Development may be Moving Toward Conciliation

By Sophie Braccini

A smaller footprint and smaller lots were favored by the Moraga Planning Commission on April 2 as it reviewed the final Environmental Impact Report for the subdivision of the Hetfield property, which is located off Sanders Drive in Moraga, along a creek, on 58.2 acres of MOSO open space land. According to some of the neighbors this is a step in the right direction, although some concerns remain.

During the long meeting the applicant, John Wyro, acknowledged that this project has been a lot of work and has taken a long time to be approved. The first application was filed in December of 2005. "If it's taken so long it's because the first plans, with six large lots and commensurate very large houses, were out of character with the neighborhood," said neighbor Bob Ellerbeck. "The risks and environmental impacts were not mitigated either. But the neighbors recognize that this is a private property that can be developed, as long as it abides by local regulations and guidelines."

"I thought that the Planning Commission did its homework," commented Wyro after the meeting. "We'll spend more time now on the conceptual development plan, with the eight-lot small footprint option that the Commission prefers." Wyro is confident that the Environmental Impact Report (EIR) indicates that all of the impacts can be mitigated to a less than significant level. "These new lots will be closer in size to the average lot size currently existing on Sanders Drive," he said. "The three houses at the end of Sanders will have no house behind them and we are working with the other neighbors to limit the visual impact." Wyro added that, in an effort to be a good neighbor, he has offered to add vegetation to the back yards of some of the Sanders properties, and has even given them some land that they thought they owned, but in fact they did not.

Smaller homes relieved some of the neighbors' concerns, but others remain. "Everything can be mitigated, but at what cost?" asked Ellerbeck. "If this development is too expensive we risk a situation where grading will take place, home pads carved in the hillside, but no construction happens. And we would be left with an ugly scorched hill." He speaks from experience, since this scenario happened on another nearby property.

"We are very concerned with the economics of the project," added Malcolm Cooper, who also lives on Sanders Drive. "One of the Commissioners calculated that it would take 9,400 truck loads to move the dirt of the proposed grading. How could that amount of work be financed with only six relatively small homes?"

"No developer, now-a-days, would take the risk of grading, if they had not calculated that the whole project was financially sound," answered Wyro.

Eleanor Vaughn, another Sanders Drive resident, is still not a big fan of the project. "We experienced a landslide here in the '80s," she said. "We were all affected by it physically and financially. I don't care what the engineer says, that hill is still unstable. At the time of the slide, it was decided that the property was not fit for building and the owner decided to abandon his development project. The property was sold to different owners over the years."

The EIR addresses landslide concerns, noting that the proposed building sites in the Hetfield subdivision are not being constructed on landslide debris, and the hillside southwest of the building sites is to be reconstructed as an engineered fill that is keyed into bedrock. The report goes on to state that, too often, older residential projects were constructed on or immediately adjacent to landslide deposits, constructed within the floodplain of creeks, and/or built on undocumented fill.

The next step should be taken in May with a presentation of the conceptual plan by the Wyro Company.

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[back](#)

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