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Planning Commission Approves Hetfield Subdivision

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It took only six and a half years for The Wyro Company to get the conceptual design of the subdivision of the Hetfield Estate past the Moraga Planning Commission. The seven-lot plan that the Commission approved in mid-July is quite different than the original- the overall footprint and lot sizes are smaller, the impact on existing slides has been diminished and the size of the homes should not exceed 4,000 square feet. Early opponents of the project, the non-profit Preserve Lamorinda Open Space and some of the neighbors along Sanders Drive, said at the meeting that they could work with the plan. One of the participants described this project as a good example of give and take, leading to a compromise.

Staff opened the discussion at the July 16 meeting with a new conceptual plan for the 58.20-acre property located off Sanders Drive, along a creek. The property, which includes six large slides, offers a scenic landscape and is zoned MOSO, the Moraga Open Space Ordinance, which limits development on undeveloped lots and hill sides.

At an April meeting John Wyro, representing the owners, proposed six large lots that would have been able to accommodate large homes, under a Moraga rule that sizes a home in proportion to the land it occupies. Town staff offered up an alternative plan for eight smaller lots with smaller homes. The purpose of reducing the global footprint of the development was to avoid disturbing three slides that will need to be excavated and stabilized, a serious endeavor that will move tens of thousands of cubic yards of dirt. The new 7-lot plan proposed by staff should leave one of the remaining 3 impacted slides undisturbed.

"We will not oppose staff's plan," said Suzanne Jones on behalf of Preserve Lamorinda Open Space, a group that had been against the development of the Hetfield property.

Some of the neighbors expressed deep concern over having homes built across from their back yards. Others moved closer to a compromise solution. Bob Hellerbeck indicated that he could support what he called a well thought-out, 7-home plan. "It would be my hope that the neighbors can work with Mr. Wyro to insure the least impact on the environment and a positive outcome for everybody," he said.

Wyro adopted a more conciliatory position as well. "I, too, appreciate the process," he said. "The comments that are made affect our thinking...In the spirit of moving this plan forward and making things happen, we are willing to accept staff's recommendation for 7 lots with a maximum house size, including garage, of 4,000 square feet."

The commissioners debated the opportunity to further limit the size of the homes, since one of the major concerns of the neighbors was that the new homes would be out of character with the rest of the neighborhood in which homes average 2,100 square feet. "What is the maximum size allowed for the homes on Sanders Dr. if the owners wanted to remodel?" asked Commissioner Jim Kline. Planning Director Shawna Brekke-Read did a quick calculation using the average size of the lots along that street and answered, "About 4,200 square feet." Kline responded, "Then I don't see why we should limit the size of the new homes below what the neighborhood is authorized to build."

This reasoning persuaded his colleagues. The Commission also limited the number of adjacent two-story homes in the development, and required the planting of native evergreen trees to provide winter screening of the new structures.

The last concern was that the site might suffer the same fate as the Vista Encinos project. That property was approved for subdivision for the Wyro Company, resold to a new developer that carved home pads and has since left the site disfigured and unattended. Staff proposed to add a yearly review of the project and obligation to take care of the landscaping until homes are built.

Next steps for the project include approval of the general development plan and precise development plan.

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