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Downtown Condo Developer Gets Feedback

By Cathy Tyson

Readers may remember the colorful Cherry Picker Party photo and story that was on the front page of this newspaper in April of this year - seven booms were rented to demonstrate the height and mass of a proposed condominium project in downtown Lafayette. The developer, KB Home, was back before the Planning Commission last week to garner feedback on the proposed condominium project.

Senior Vice President of KB Home Ray Panek and architect Jeffrey Heller presented their latest revisions to the Commission. Four options that shifted some of the mass of the structure were presented along with discussion of an array of governing documents over the Town Center III KB Home project located behind Panda Express. Even experienced Planning Commissioners were somewhat baffled by the number of documents that govern the property - a Settlement Agreement, Process Agreement, and the Development Agreement that requires the project to be evaluated for conformance with the 1974 - 2002 General Plan - which did not establish a maximum building height. "What are we bounded by?" asked Commissioner Tom Chastain. "I'm having a hard time connecting the dots." The long messy history of this parcel started back in 1988 when Bedford Properties asked for re-zoning, kicking off what turned out to be 24 years of sporadic activity with successor interests - Lafayette Town Center Associates and Lafayette Residential Partners, LLC. Loose ends remained after last week's Planning Commission meeting, but Planning and Building Services Manager Niroop Srivatsa promised clarification for the next Planning Commission addressing the KB Home project in September.

Panek and Heller pointed out that the current proposal has been downsized in response to prior suggestions by the Design Review Commission - originally starting with 89 units, shrinking to 81 and now at 74 units on the nearly one and a half acre site; a children's playground has been added along with more green space in the public area near the creek. Heller noted that the building's height is lower than the apartments next door and, "we've created a very attractive terminus for Dewing Avenue."

Constructive suggestions were made by the Design Review Commission at two meetings in April and June of this year, but the developer's proposed changes were not enough to garner staff's support at this time. This meeting's purpose was to provide more direction to the applicant, and highlight specific concerns, so that the developer can come back to the September meeting with appropriate revisions.

Quite a few residents stepped up to make public comments in favor of multi-family development at this site, echoing the sentiments of Planning Commissioners and staff; roughly twice as many speakers were in favor of the project than opposed to it. Proponents noted access to BART, sustainability, providing affordable housing for young people and retirees, and contributing to a robust, vibrant downtown. Loss of parking, increased traffic, plus the size (mass and height) were pointed out as reasons opponents felt it wasn't a good fit for downtown Lafayette.

Hopefully all of the rules and regulations will become clear when this matter is before the Planning Commission again September 4 in the Community Hall of the Lafayette Library and Learning Center. As always, the public is welcome to attend.

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