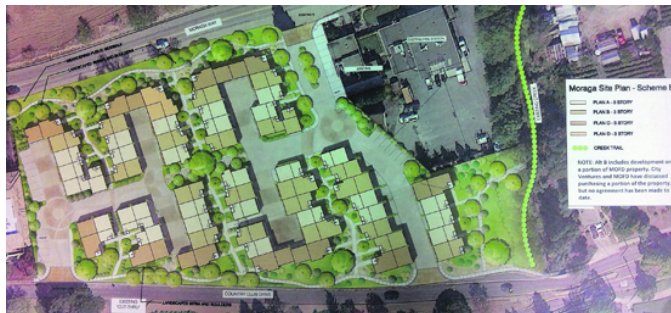


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Thumbs Up for 50+ Units of Housing

By Sophie Braccini



Moraga's Planning Commission and Design Review Board agreed at a recent joint meeting that preliminary plans for 50 to 55 condominium units proposed by City Ventures, next to the fire station on Moraga Way, look good. The planned density for the roughly three-acre parcel is consistent with the Moraga Center Specific Plan (MCSP) that the Town approved two years ago. Commissioners and board members liked the design proposed by a developer who is experienced in such projects and has produced some attractive high-density districts in other Bay Area communities.

The Moraga project proposes about 50 multi-family units, two and three stories high, each with two or three bedrooms and two-car garages; a possible alternate plan is for 55 units. "I am very passionate about what we do with municipalities at City Ventures, which is in-fill development," said City Ventures' Philip Kerr in the opening of his presentation at the joint meeting. "A lot of what we do is work with small towns as they develop their downtowns. How do you develop as towns grow toward the core? It's more complex because you have adjacencies." Kerr said that developing housing near shopping and parks is what it

City Ventures' conceptual development plan for Town Center Homes Image provided

takes to develop a sense of place.

The big adjacency to this project is Moraga Orinda Fire District (MOFD) Station 41. Not only is it a facility from which fire engines and paramedic vehicles may emerge at any time with blaring sirens, but the station is also a training ground for fire fighters. Former MOFD board member Brook Mancinelli, an Orinda resident, opposes the project. In a letter to the Planning Department he wrote, "Routine and extended use of heavy machinery, fire apparatus, chainsaws, aerial ladders, high volume water flow, and the recently acquired fire simulation props and high-rise training tower will easily overwhelm any rational mitigation measures and are genuinely incompatible."

Planning commissioners and Design Review Board (DRB) members expressed concerns about the noise, asking about mitigation and also about MOFD's position. Kerr presented pictures of numerous fire stations in the Bay Area located in the middle of developments. He indicated that mitigation would include walls around the perimeter of the station, windows and wall insulation in the homes, and plantations. "We have a station in the middle of a residential area in Orinda," noted MOFD Fire Chief Randy Bradley who attended the meeting. "The residents love to have us there."

The commission and board agreed that the project's density of about 17 units per acre is appropriate under the MCSP, which designates this parcel for housing/office use with a density of 12 to 20 units per acre.

Because the project is located along one of the town's scenic corridors, Moraga Way, questions were asked about the look of the project. Many cited the Sonsara development across the street and to the north with its large greenery buffer between the homes and the street. "This is not Sonsara," said Kerr, "this is multifamily housing. But we propose to create a large green space along Moraga Way, with a meandering path, comparable to what the country club has done."

Certain elements particularly appealed to the commissioners, such as the fact that the project will be LEED Gold, with solar panels providing energy to the homes, and a proposed trail along the creek that borders part of the development. They asked for some modifications such as additional guest parking, a play area for kids, and not allowing access to the development directly from Moraga Way to mitigate traffic impacts.

The project will come back to the Planning Commission and Design Review Board for final approval. If it is determined to be compliant with the Moraga Center Specific Plan, no Environmental Impact Review will be required. This is the third high-density housing project that the Planning Department has been actively working on in recent months; the MCSP projects the eventual construction of 700 new housing units in the downtown area.

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