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Dense Sophistication: SummerHill Responds to Planning Challenge

By Sophie Braccini

If the proposed SummerHill development off Camino Ricardo is any indicator, developers will face some challenges if they want to build a share of the 700 dwelling units approved in the Moraga Center Specific Plan (MCSP). At a Jan. 7 meeting with the Moraga Planning Commission, SummerHill's Denise Cunningham and her team presented a new version of their design that incorporated the commission's previous remarks and requirements. Only half of the commissioners liked the improved plan and neighbors, objecting to having a park instead of homes abutting their back yards, raised new issues.

The new plan proposed by SummerHill for its 14.26-acre development was praised by members of the public and some of the commissioners for its focus on creating a custom-home feel. "We designed each of the 26 homes according to the topography," explained the project's architect. The result is that no two homes are alike and each has landscaping that will add to its uniqueness.

"We visited the Sonsara development across the street and noticed the attention to detail that made that development a success," the architect added. "Sonsara has been well received in the town and many have expressed their desire that this be held as a standard for quality and design they would like to see in the MCSP," confirmed Cunningham after the meeting.

Design changes included softening the straight road with curves, reducing the number of homes from 28 to 26 and adding a landscaped buffer between homes and Camino Ricardo.

Despite these changes, Commissioners Jim Kline and David Killam opposed the project. Kline cited density and compatibility with the existing neighborhood, and Killam believed that the distance between homes was not enough and that the street was too narrow.

Commission Chair Stacia Levenfeld and Commissioner Christine Kuckuk supported the plan. "We must remember that the whole project (MCSP) was created to implement denser housing," said Levenfeld. "Here we're getting something even better than what was envisioned in the MCSP."

A neighbor raised a completely new issue during the meeting. A large portion of the property, located between two creeks, has been excluded from all development. SummerHill, following the lead of town staff, is proposing to turn that piece of land into a neighborhood park. Resident John Reed came to the January meeting to oppose that option. "This is a zoning violation," he said. When he and his wife bought their home in 1977 on Crossbrook Court, they checked with the Planning Department to find out about the zoning of the undeveloped property that was backing theirs—it was for three dwelling units per acre. "Having another home on the other side of the fence is what should be, not a park," he said.

No action was taken. SummerHill will return to the planning commission in a few months.

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