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Developing Bollinger Valley

By *Sophie Braccini*

The field has been primed for a familiar battle. On April 17 the Moraga Planning Commission received and commented on the Draft Environmental Impact Report for the proposed development of 126 homes in Bollinger Valley. This first public step is only the beginning of what promises to be a long series of meetings.

On one side is the land owner-the Bruzzone family, represented by David Bruzzone and planner Dick Loewke-who wants to be granted the right to build enough homes to balance the enormous investment the site will require. On the opposing side are residents of Moraga and Lafayette, diversely impacted by the proposed project, seeking to stop, or at least minimize, the development.

Large numbers of residents came to the presentation of the lengthy DEIR for the 186-acre parcel located to the northeast of Moraga, prepared by consultants Hauge Brueck who proposed five alternatives, ranging from 121 homes to none, and studied the possibilities for mitigating impacts on the environment- from natural resources, to traffic, schools, views and noise.

"Alternative three (37 homes) would be a superior option because some of the existing conditions of the valley (such as creek banks collapsing and landslides) would be remedied," said Rob Brueck, who added that all of the other alternatives would have unavoidable impacts. He cited traffic and air pollution as impacts that could not be remedied; and visual impact, wildlife and vegetation disturbance, exposure to geological hazard, depletion of ground water supply, noise levels, impacts on Moraga intersections, as those that could be mitigated.

The landowner had 10 minutes to present the project. Some 40 years ago, the same owner developed the Bluffs, the adjacent property where a similar sized project was built. Loewke explained that developing this new parcel would solve some of the problems of the Bluffs. For example, this neighborhood has only one road to enter or exit toward town; the new project adds an Emergency Vehicle Access (EVA) road that would serve both neighborhoods. The EVA would start as an extension of an interior loop road on the site and follow an existing fire road to a point that terminates at St. Mary's Road in Lafayette.

Loewke said that the project, now in its 12th year of behind the scenes preparation with experts and Moraga staff, would require an investment of \$34 million, a cost that could not be supported if the number of homes is too small- that cost includes the reconstruction and widening of Valley Hill drive, the EVA, public utility connections, grading, and the construction of water detention basins. He presented the 126-home proposal under which structures would be massed toward the western and northern part of the property, close to ridge lines, leaving the wooded southwestern area undisturbed.

"From St. Mary's Road, you can see the lower hills that separate the site from the surrounding landscape, but you can't see any of the interior of the site, and you can see the ridge line of Las Trampas in the background," said Loewke to demonstrate the minimal visual impact of the development.

Twenty-five residents of Moraga and Lafayette lined up to list issues they felt the DEIR did not adequately address. First was the impact of the new development on Bollinger Canyon Road, an aspect that was not included in the present version of the DEIR. "No one mentioned fixing Bollinger Canyon Road," said Bluffs resident Judy Howard.

"That road is a disaster; I can't imagine more cars on that road. And I was almost hit many times turning right from Joseph Drive onto Bollinger Canyon." Planning commission chair, and Bluffs resident, Frank Comprelli added that this intersection is located just after a blind curve and that traffic impacts there should be studied in the EIR.

Lafayette residents added concerns about the impacts on St. Mary's Road and added that Lafayette could deny the owner the creation of an EVA that would exit within its city limits.

The project would require major grading-the removal of 1.5 million cubic yards of soil to create a plateau where the homes will be built. Resident Suzanne Jones said that if you were to expand that amount of soil across a football field it would be 700 feet deep. Jones also pointed out that the General Plan requires that development conform to the natural topography of a site.

Some asked that the EIR consider not only the impact of this development, but of developments that are already approved on key elements like traffic impacts for Lafayette and Orinda, and the Moraga school system. "There are about 1,000 new dwelling units approved for development in Moraga, and none of those have been built yet," said resident Lynda Deschambault. "That's about 10,000 additional trips a day."

"We always look at things in a vacuum," agreed commissioner Stacia Levenfeld. "The EIR needs to look at the cumulative effect of all those developments on traffic and schools."

Other concerns that residents felt had not been addressed by the DEIR included the impact on wells and springs currently used by residents of the valley, impacts on wildlife and native vegetation, additional noise, air and traffic impacts during construction, and impacts to adjacent farmland, pedestrians and bicyclists.

After the meeting, Bruzzone said that Orinda, Lafayette, and Moraga took actions in the past that eliminated additional roadway connections for Moraga residents. "The original General Plan assumed those new connections wouldn't be made, and approved our planned population (anticipated to be in excess of 22,000) based on our existing current roadway network," he said.

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