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Property Rights or Historic Preservation for Lafayette Adobe? \$2 million teardown?

By Cathy Tyson



Photo Cathy Tyson

Controversy swirls around one of the few remaining Monterey Colonial Revival adobe homes in Lafayette. The four bedroom, 3.5 bathroom home sits on a level 1.8 acre lot with a lily pond, guest house and white picket fence. It was listed for sale in November, 2012 for \$2.2 million and closed at \$1.95 million on Dec. 31, according to public records. A group of supporters have launched a Facebook page called "Save Lafayette's History" to rally around the 3,000 square foot home, built in 1936 on Las Huertas Road.

The original land is composed of two lots, created in 1916 as part of Rancho Laguna De Los Palos Colorados. Lot one was purchased in 1935, fronts Las Huertas Road and is a generally square shaped; lot two, purchased in 1952, is an irregular rectangle along the back of lot one bordered by Las Trampas Road.

The city was slated to discuss an application by the new owners, Charles and Denise Rosson, for a lot line revision because both lots are under single ownership and if re-configured, street frontage and possible improvements would be easier. Due to lack of a quorum, the matter was rescheduled to May 20.

If approved, the new orientation would split the parcel lengthwise into two parcels - one with the existing home and a 34,000 square foot undeveloped parcel. With the new location of the lot line, the home doesn't meet setback requirements. Current owners want to demolish it; the city has offered to work with them to allow a variance, thus preserving the home. At this time, the new owners are not pursuing that option.

Current zoning would allow the property owner the right to develop the second lot, now reconfigured to a more lengthwise orientation running from Las Huertas to Las Trampas, in the future if it meets all the zoning requirements.

The property was sold by the estate of Marjorie McAllister Stolley. Mrs. Stolley lived in the home for the vast majority of her adult life, until she was just shy of 100. She married first husband Sumner McAllister in 1931. The young couple enlisted the help of locally prominent architect Berkeley Reede Hardman to design the home and they moved in when the home was completed in 1936. McAllister died in 1968. Marjorie remained in the home, and later married Bruno Stolley in 1971. She continued her tenure even after Bruno Stolley's passing in 1994. Mrs. Stolley was a well-known and popular figure in the neighborhood; she had four children, 13 grandchildren and 17 great-grandchildren.

Supporters of preserving one of the few adobe homes in Lafayette are irked that the current owners originally told the estate they wanted to live in the home, but as of Feb. 1, just months after purchasing it, filed an application for a lot line revision that would include the demolition of the home. According to a representative of the Stolley estate, when the home was purchased by the Rossons structural reports were completed and some minor repairs addressed. At the time of the sale, the buyers included a letter that stated they wanted to make it their family home.

"They have initiated a campaign to inform the neighborhood that the home is not structurally sound enough to endure an earthquake and must be torn down," said Joanna Mylin who is spearheading the Facebook campaign."

Supporters are trying to get it on the National Register of Historic Places in order to prevent the proposed demolition. One of the criteria specifies that the home is associated with events that have made a significant contribution to the broad pattern of history. McAllister lived in the home while obtaining patents for synthetic rubber during World War II. He ultimately became an executive with Shell Oil and was a polymer chemist. Another possible claim to fame is prominent architect Berkeley Reede Hardman, who designed a former sorority house at UC Berkeley formerly occupied by Phi Omega Pi, then Delta Phi Epsilon on Le Conte Avenue.

Lamorinda Weekly made several unsuccessful attempts to reach the Rossons through their contact person Mike Branagh. The Lafayette Planning Commission will discuss the matter at its May 20 meeting, which will start at 7 p.m. in the Community Hall of the Lafayette Library and Learning Center.

Reach the reporter at: cathy@lamorindaweekly.com

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