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Town Council to Discuss Ridgeline and Hillside Development

By Sophie Braccini

Mayor Dave Trotter said recently, "The approval of the Rancho Laguna development by the council last year made it clear that our regulations protecting ridgeline and hillside development need to be strengthened." The Moraga Town Council is expected to decide Sept. 11 whether or not the town and its residents should pursue a dialogue regarding the potential modification of ordinances and guidelines pertaining to development on slopes and ridgelines. If the Town Council votes to proceed, the planning commission will open what is likely to be a very long series of meetings at which residents will have ample opportunity to voice their opinions.

The Rancho Laguna development, which Trotter opposed, includes a lot that requires major grading of a minor ridgeline, which can be seen from some of Moraga's trails. When Trotter became mayor at the beginning of the year, he established a review of the regulations as one of the town's goals for 2013.

The planning commission was asked to take a first look in late July. "We'd like you to provide initial feedback and comments for the Town Council," Shawna Brekke-Read, planning director, told commissioners as she introduced the subject.

Conservation versus development - the veterans of years of local land use wars came to the July meeting prepared for a new battle.

"Moraga will be initiating yet another round of unwarranted changes to our current very significant and regulated town laws and policies affecting development on our hillsides and ridgelines," commented Moraga property owner David Bruzzone. "These actions, though appearing benign and innocuous to most Moragans, are in fact very aggressive and belligerent actions that seek to implement policies from the failed voter initiative MOSO 2008. These changes will expand the scope and will seek to impose selected and targeted modifications to our laws that will take away what few remaining property rights still exist for these targeted parcels."

Suzanne Jones spoke on behalf of Preserve Lamorinda Open Space. "One of our major concerns is that a slope average can be taken over an arbitrarily large area; the problem with that is that a slope of any steepness can be developed provided that there is flatter land also included in the area to drive the overall average down... this has become a major loophole that has allowed development on steep slopes in excess of 20 percent," she said. She sees as a second issue an inconsistency between the MOSO restriction on development of high-risk land and the guidelines that open the possibility of allowing massive grading to mediate the risk.

The different tools that the planning commission could discuss include overlay districts that do not change the original zoning but add a layer of regulation. Brekke-Read said that the General Plan mentions the possibility of creating a hillside zoning overlay, a high risk zoning overlay, and a moderate risk overlay. The commission could also review MOSO guidelines that have been amended before.

The recommended priorities the planning commission will forward to the Town Council include reviews of the town's unprotected ridgelines and how slopes are calculated, and the uniform application of definitions and rules.

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