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## Signature Homes Goes the Extra Mile for Via Moraga

*By Sophie Braccini*

According to Moraga Planning Commission chair Frank Comprelli, it is rare that a developer spends so much time in preparation work before the plans for their projects are submitted to the Planning Commission. Since 2011, Signature Homes has been working with staff and the Planning Commission in a number of study sessions, including two joint meetings with the Design Review Board, to consider proposals for a residential development now called Via Moraga on the former bowling alley site at 489 Moraga Road across from the Rheem Center.

Signature Homes also invited planning commissioners to visit local sites that have similarities to the Via Moraga project. The result is that commissioners appeared very supportive at their Sept. 3 meeting and although some questions still need to be answered, it appears likely that the project will move forward.

"The main takeaway (of the visits) was that it was tremendously helpful to be able to see similar construction projects in comparable surroundings to what is proposed for Moraga," said commissioner Teresa Onoda. On the 2-acre lot that lies between AAAAA Rent-A-Space and Rheem Veterinary Medical Hospital, Signature Homes is proposing 18 single, two-story detached family homes on lots no larger than 3,400 square feet. The challenge for commissioners was to visualize the impact on the scenic corridor just by looking at maps and drawings.

The tour that Signature Homes took the commissioners on included four different sites, one in Moraga and three in Danville. "None of them was exactly what is proposed, but each had some characteristics of the project, or were an example of what should not be done, so we would be able to understand, for example, what the visual effect of a 5- or 10-foot setback really is," said Comprelli.

The Moraga site was Carroll Ranch, a small-lot duplex home community off Moraga Road next to Campolindo High School. The density of Carroll Ranch is a little less than the new project, but "it was useful to see what the development becomes after a few years when the landscape has matured," noted Comprelli.

Kenwood Lane, Cedar Hollow and River Rock in Danville are all small-lot, single-family detached homes with relatively similar density, including, or not, some of the features that Via Moraga proposes. "My takeaway from the tour was what some of the variations are, and I hope we capitalize on the things the other developments did right," said Onoda, "for example sidewalks, curves in the entrances, variety of models, and since Via Moraga is the only development situated across from a shopping center it must be very pedestrian and bicycle friendly."

Some of the elements brought forward from previous iterations of the project were well received by commissioners, including sidewalks, two-car garages with driveways, and variety designed to avoid the 'wall of homes' effect.

But some elements are still unresolved. Christine Kuckuck, one of only three commissioners who were present at previous sessions, confirmed her preference for a single entrance to the project that would, according to her, minimize the visual impact on the scenic corridor and create more of a village feeling for future residents.

All of the commissioners highlighted the importance of finalizing a traffic study to answer questions such as: Where should pedestrians cross Moraga Way to go to the shopping center or come home from the bus stop? Should residents be permitted to turn left while exiting the project? The number of guest parking spaces also needs further review.

"Questions remain and will need to be answered," said Comprelli, "but this is a perfectly appropriate type of development along Moraga Road and across from the shopping center. They have the right mix and the right density." The application process will probably take several more months; it may be a few years before the new homes are on the market.

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[back](#)

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