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## Restoring Natural Habitat in the Heart of Moraga

*By Sophie Braccini*

The Moraga Planning Commission recently reviewed Summerhill Homes' application to build 26 houses off of Camino Ricardo, one of the first projects in the area governed by the Moraga Center Specific Plan to come to fruition.

Already approved by the Design Review Board, the homes did not elicit much controversy. Planning commissioners also spent some time reviewing the proposal for a 5-acre passive park contiguous to the homes; the unique visual and educational area in the heart of Moraga will be donated to the town.

The portion of the 14.2-acre site located between Laguna Creek and its tributary was initially proposed as a neighborhood park with recreation equipment. Discussion with the Planning Commission and Design Review Board revealed that a passive park, for walking or informal picnics, was preferred. However, the developer intended to drop on the lot a large portion of the earth that would be excavated to place the homes and road. "It does not make a lot of sense to kill the vegetation by dumping eight feet of dirt on the site and then replanting it with native plants," said commissioner Teresa Onoda. She passed around photos she had taken of the site with a ladder illustrating the height of the excavated dirt, which made it clear that nothing would survive such a burial.

Residents pointed out the existence of a native animal population at the site, including the protected dusky-footed wood rat, and asked for as little disturbance as possible. Commissioner Nancy Schoenbrunner said she had learned that the creek was the place where local rainbow trout were originally discovered and she wanted an investigation into whether Moraga was still a spawning ground for the fish. The commissioners unanimously agreed that the developer must haul away all of the excavated dirt. The new park is destined to be restored to pre-agriculture vegetation and will serve as a place of discovery and education about local flora and fauna.

Denise Cunningham, of Summerhill Homes, said that it might be possible for the company to use the excavated dirt as fill on the other Moraga property it is developing - Rancho Laguna II, near Rheem Boulevard.

Residents living next to the project acknowledged efforts made by the developer to minimize the visual impact of the new homes. "In Moraga, the code protects public views from being impacted by new development, but not private views," commented senior planner Ellen Clark. Summerhill worked to protect the views of neighboring homeowners by redesigning some of the houses to be single-level and moving the building pads; they asked to bend the setback rules slightly to accommodate the new design.

The Planning Commission is expected to approve the project's Conceptual and General Development Plan, the Vesting Tentative Subdivision Map, the Hillside Development Permit, the Grading Permit, the Conditional Use Permit, and Design Review in early January. These documents will be approved together, which is unusual in Moraga.

Shawna Brekke-Read, Moraga's planning director, explained that any property that is zoned for planned development needs to go through a three-step process. Summerhill was asked to consolidate the process into one single phase, because the Camino Ricardo project is part of the Moraga Center Specific Plan that was seven years in the making and included many preliminary studies such as a traffic impact report.

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