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Residents Fight Downtown Development

By Sophie Braccini

Residents were frustrated when the Design Review Board recommended the Moraga Center Homes project for approval at its July 14 meeting. Board member Gerald Kirkpatrick made the case clear: Under the Moraga Center Specific Plan, which was approved in 2010, the board's hands are tied and all it can do is check the conformity of the project with the long-approved land use rule. But the group of protesting residents, some of them calling themselves Moraga First, could not fathom why staff and commissioners would not be responsive to their concerns.

"Where were you four years ago when the plan was approved?" Kirkpatrick asked the residents who attended the meeting. The board member explained that it took seven years to approve the Moraga Center Specific Plan, which was found to be compliant with Moraga's General Plan and all of the environmental impacts were found acceptable for the density of developments that were defined. As a result, when a project is proposed for the area that is in compliance with the Moraga Center Specific Plan, the impacts on traffic, schools and infrastructure don't need to be reviewed since that work has already been done. "All we can do is check the compliance of the project with the Moraga Center Specific Plan," he repeated.

Most of the locals who attended the meeting are residents of the Moraga Country Club, which borders the new project. Recently the developer, City Ventures, erected story poles on the proposed site to outline the new buildings, and the massing of the project shocked some of them. Dick Olsen, who participated in the town's incorporation almost 40 years ago and followed the development of the specific plan, explained, "The very reason we incorporated Moraga was to ensure that no such massive development would ever be imposed. It is ironic that as we are getting ready to celebrate the anniversary of the incorporation, a project that would have such devastating impact seems to be on the fast track for approval."

Other residents raised concerns about parking, traffic, and private views from their homes. Board member John Glover raised a parallel concern. "One of the things that is being considered by the town right now ... is view shed protection; and in fact the story poles block the view from Moraga Way, a scenic corridor, of the hillside behind it," he argued. "Are we acting too soon before the town gets a chance to make determination about view shed protection? This is going to be a precedent."

The argument gave some steam to the opposing group but it was quickly dispelled by Shawna Brekke-Read, the town's planning director, when she explained that the town council adopted the Moraga Center Specific Plan with allowable heights up to three stories for that location, and that staff must work with existing regulations, not possible future regulations.

Residents also pointed out that the Moraga-Orinda Fire District expressed concern about homes being built next door to one of its training grounds. The board decided to comply with one of the fire district's recommendations and make sure that new and subsequent buyers of the Moraga Center homes receive full disclosure about the potential unpleasantness that may be associated with a training facility, such as noise and smoke.

The last argument of the group pertained to the Moraga Center Specific Plan itself. "A concern of both the cities of Orinda and Lafayette was that increasing the number of units was going to have significant impact on traffic flow," said Olsen. "The response was that (what would be built) would be small units for seniors and that's not the case here - those are large units with two-car garages. I suggest to you that this is not consistent with the pledge made to the two other cities by the town."

Jerry Tanner said he supported the development, but that it should be smaller to better match its surroundings, he suggested that only 25 homes, with more parking, be constructed on the site. "If something good does not come out of this pretty quick, Moraga Country Club, which is the biggest voting block in this town, is going to rise up," said another resident who was on the club's board for six years.

Board members, with the exception of Glover, were not fazed by the public comments. They congratulated the developer for significantly improving its design, going from 55 to 36 homes, adding architectural details and variations in the setback along Moraga Way to create an appealing look. They approved the design, with Glover opposed.

The board's recommendation will go to the Planning Commission, possibly during the summer, for approval. The Moraga Town Council will not review the project unless it is appealed at that time. There is still work to be done before anything is built, including detailed architectural and landscaping plans. Moraga First plans to continue its campaign, challenging the council to do something to stop, or at least slow, the project.

A Specific Plan is Born

If you want to read more about the history of the Moraga Center Specific Plan, the following articles can be found in our online archive; the first one appeared in Volume 1, issue 9 (three months into our first year of publication).

Environmental Impact Report:

Issue date June 13, 2007, "Moraga Center EIR Will Study 720 New Dwelling Units"

www.lamorindaweekly.com/archive/issue0109/pdf/MoragaCenterEIRWillStudy720NewDwellingUnits.pdf

Visualizing and vetting the plan:

Issue date June 25, 2008, "Moraga Center Specific Plan Takes Shape: Community Input Needed"

www.lamorindaweekly.com/archive/issue0208/pdf/Moraga-Center-Specific-Plan-Takes-Shape-Community-Input-Needed.pdf

Issue date April 29, 2009: "Specific Plan Approved by Moraga Planning Commission"

www.lamorindaweekly.com/archive/issue0304/Specific-Plan-Approved-by-Moraga-Planning-Commission.html

Approval of the plan by the Moraga Town Council is delayed:

Issue date Dec. 9, 2009, "Approval of Moraga Specific Plan Delayed"

www.lamorindaweekly.com/archive/issue0320/Approval-of-Moraga-Specific-Plan-Delayed.html

Issue date Dec. 23, 2009, "Ministerial Process Delays Specific Plan Approval"

www.lamorindaweekly.com/archive/issue0321/Ministerial-Process-Delays-Specific-Plan-Approval.html

The Moraga Town Council approves the Moraga Center Specific Plan:

Issue date Feb. 10, 2010 - "Ten Years in the Making"

www.lamorindaweekly.com/archive/issue0324/Ten-Years-in-the-Making.html

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