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Large Wight House Application on Hold

By Cathy Tyson

After years of public meetings and countless comments from residents, the very controversial 10,000-square-foot home proposed at the top of Monticello Road got a last minute reprieve when a final decision about the Hillside Development Permit application was continued to the next Lafayette City Council meeting, scheduled for Nov. 10.

Following its first vote on the matter in September, in which the council rejected the permit 4-1, the item was on the council's consent agenda for a second reading and final vote Oct. 27, but a letter was received that day from attorney David Bowie disputing the grading quantities of the project. Concerns over the proposed home covered a number of topics: an estimated 5,000 truck trips through the narrow residential street, creating a nuisance to neighbors, drainage and hydrology reports, a significant amount of grading, the movement of 6,610 cubic yards of earth - the overall situation contributed to four out of the five city council members not being able to make the required findings to approve the project in September.

Bowie, representing the applicants, Steve and Linda Wight, commented in September that throughout his lengthy career, "this project has had more attention to it than any other single family home I've ever been involved in." He reminded the council that traffic generated would be on public streets and that the Wights have agreed to a construction management plan that they would fund to provide daily oversight. He also pointed out the important component of the amount of cut and fill grading was the net off-haul of soil - which was originally 1,000 cubic yards and is now down to 310 cubic yards - a minimal amount necessary to widen the driveway to accommodate fire district access.

Neighbors came out in force over the years to express their opinions, which were uniformly negative. "There simply are no mitigation measures that can address either the volume of truck traffic or duration of the project," said Ann Julius, a Monticello Road neighbor, "the only realistic solution is to reduce the size and scope of the project."

Back in 2008, the City of Lafayette approved a Phase 1 application for a 5,900-square-foot home on the property, which expired. The owners then chose in 2011 to meet with a different architect and filed an application for a 10,003-square-foot home on the 13.66 acre property. The Planning Commission considered the application in 2012 after a continued public hearing and asked that the plans be revised to reduce the height and mass, so the structure wasn't visible above the ridgeline. The commission ultimately denied the application in March of 2012.

That decision was quickly appealed and a de novo hearing was held in July that upheld the applicants' appeal, subject to specific changes.

A new application was filed in May 2013 for a new 9,638-square-foot residence with a 365-square-foot garden room and an attached three-car garage.

As part of the 17-page draft denial resolution the city points out that due process requirements have been met, but that the findings for approval of the project can't be made. Four of the five city council members cited that development grading should be minimized - and that the considerable amount of cut and fill with the project, along with the 5,000-square-foot footprint, is in no way minimal.

Another municipal code section declares that "development will not create a nuisance, or hazard." The majority felt that 5,000 truck trips over roughly 88 weeks to transport materials and labor create a hazard for drivers, bike riders and pedestrians.

Council Member Mike Anderson saw things differently. "People have a right to build on property that they own," he stated, noting that the long driveway to the home already exists, and some of the grading will be used to widen the road for required fire equipment access. The approximately half-acre site is really the only available spot for the home on a relatively flat saddle portion of the property, and with the proper construction management plan, residents will have a safer neighborhood than they currently have.

There was a bit of lag time after the September council meeting. Council Member Brandt Andersson, an attorney, wanted to give the city's legal staff some time to go over the resolution and look at the basis of denial. After hearing Anderson's comments he suggested it's possible that "prudent people can argue either way."

It is unclear if this continuance will change the final outcome. Going forward, if the project is denied, it's possible the property owners could file suit, or they may submit a new application for a revised project that would be reviewed on its own merits.

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