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## Possible Parking, Housing on City-owned Land

By Cathy Tyson



Image courtesy Branagh Development

Looking for an exchange of ideas about a potential parking garage and workforce housing at city-owned 949 Moraga Road, Matt Branagh of Branagh Development presented some preliminary concepts to the Design Review Commission to evaluate its feasibility. The fate of this parcel was undecided until a volunteer task force was set up in 2014 to find the highest, best and most fiscally responsible use of the property. After much deliberation, the task force decided the best options for the site would be parking or affordable housing, or both. It also said the site could be developed as a boutique hotel. Since parking funds were used to purchase the land, parking needs to be incorporated into whatever the city ultimately selects.

In a February letter to the mayor and city council, Branagh wrote, "We have been aware of the city's desire to use 949 Moraga Road for affordable housing and public parking and believe that we can partner with the city to achieve those goals."

Branagh asked the city for a 90-day non-exclusive window to flesh out options at the site, as a possible unique solution to transfer the required affordable housing obligation from another project

across town - a 60,000-square-foot office building purchased with other investors on 4.5 acres behind the currently under construction Woodbury condominiums. The investors are considering options to build residential condominiums on that site.

At the first of a few workshops, Branagh, along with architect Scott Thomsen of Ward-Young Architecture, and urban design expert Renee Chow of Studio Urbis presented preliminary concepts to the Design Review Commission. They were looking for feedback and direction on a two level parking garage at the rear of the 0.74-acre property, with multi-story workforce housing and a possible senior center at street level fronting Moraga Road.

The study session focused on business points that would need solutions before any development could happen. Looking to create a win-win situation, Branagh commented that the site has "a lot of potential." He has been making a good faith effort footing the bill for professionals to design a way to develop the property creatively.

While the 0.74-acre parcel may have potential, it was clear that getting in and out from Moraga Road is going to be a challenge. Branagh explored other options for ingress and egress with neighboring property owners on East Street or via Brook Street and was not optimistic that either option was viable.

With challenging parking and not fantastic pedestrian access for seniors, commissioners suggested something more youth-oriented for the ground level of the housing structure. Analyzing all the nearby businesses, residential buildings, and Lafayette Elementary School, the development team determined that the key to living well is not having an entrance on Moraga Road, but rather through a landscaped courtyard.

One option discussed is a two-way left-turn lane in the center of Moraga Road. With average daily traffic counts of approximately 20,000 trips a day on the thoroughfare, commissioners were

mindful to encourage uses like all-day employee parking at the garage, to minimize additional cars on that road.

The parcel is sandwiched between predominantly retail uses to the north, professional offices and multi-family projects nearby and to the south, with Lafayette Elementary School across the street. Very preliminary plans for the mixed-use project include 22 to 24 affordable housing units and a garage that could accommodate about 80 cars.

The developer's next step will be to respond to commentary by the Design Review commissioners and return at a future date with further refinements. Branagh is optimistic: "We are excited about unlocking the opportunities of 949 Moraga Road and are still looking into its potential, which we believe is an opportunity for parking and workforce housing."

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