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City Ventures ♦ Downtown Development Project a Go

By Sophie Braccini

A three-and-a-half-hour drama played out at the Moraga Town Council meeting May 13, with some unexpected twists. But when the curtain fell, Newport Beach-based City Ventures, LLC, had the town's approval of its Moraga Town Center Homes project, a 36-unit townhouse and condominium development with some three-story-high buildings along Moraga Way at the entrance of the town, next to the fire station. This is the first parcel to be developed in a highly visible portion of the Moraga Center Specific Plan (MCSP) area in downtown Moraga.

The May 13 meeting was a continuation of an appeal filed by a group of residents against the planning commission's November 2014 approval of the project. At the first hearing in January, the council asked the developer to make modifications and then continued the appeal to a later date. Many residents opposed the project, saying it's too dense for the highly visible location and out of character with Moraga. About a dozen residents attended the meeting, explaining that this was a good project, but for another location. Some also came to support the project, explaining that infill development near retail makes sense and that the town needs new, slightly more affordable homes than the majority of existing detached single-family homes in the area. Local business owners also sent letters of support to the council.

A large portion of the game was played before the public meeting began. City Ventures met with town staff after the January continuance to make amendments to its plan. Setbacks along Moraga Road were increased, ranging from 15 to 25 feet (setbacks along Country Club Drive range from 6 to 15 feet) and the third story was removed on some of the buildings. These modifications in addition to the visual simulations showing how the development would impact the scenic corridor and the ridgeline view sheds gained staff's approval. Town staff stated the project provides architecture, landscaping and view corridors consistent with the character of Moraga.

Councilmember Mike Metcalf asked the town attorney to revisit the reasons why this project is compliant with the Moraga Center Specific Plan that was approved in 2010 and found compliant with the General Plan. The appellants argued that the MCSP is not compliant with the General Plan, but no one on the dais was willing to open that discussion.

Councilmembers Dave Trotter and Teresa Onoda, as well as Mayor Roger Wykle, asked the developer to increase the distance between the duplexes located along Country Club Drive from 10 to 25 feet - one of the MCSP requirements. As it looked like another continuance was imminent, the developer indicated that such demands, after years of work and several continuances were excessive. He asked for a five-minute recess to analyze the consequences of this new request.

When the meeting resumed, City Ventures indicated that they did not want a new continuance and offered two proposals: to either group the duplexes facing Country Club Drive and create larger buildings with more separation between them; or increase the separation between the proposed smaller buildings by a few feet on the ground level and five feet at the second-floor level.

Wykle and Trotter supported the latter offer, while Onoda maintained her opposition. The resolution denying the appeal and upholding the planning commission's decision was approved as amended, 4-1, with Onoda opposed. Staff also added a long list of esthetic and quality requirements that the developer will have to comply with when building the Moraga Town Center Homes. Now that the conceptual plan is approved, the developer will present the precise development plan to the planning commission and design review board.

After the meeting, appellant Dick Olsen expressed his disappointment. During the meeting he characterized the changes that the developer made as tinkering around the edges. When asked what the residents opposed to the project would do next, he responded, "We are considering all of the options available to citizens when they consider a council has made a significant mistake. This is only round one."

MOFD's Opposition to the Moraga Town Center Homes Project

The Moraga-Orinda Fire District opposed the development of homes next to its training facility. In a letter to the town, the MOFD board listed factors such as noise and even potential hazards that made the project unfit, in their opinion. The proposed mitigation, such as an eight-foot sound wall was not found adequate. The council members did not ignore the agency's recommendations, but did not use them to oppose the proposed development.

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