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Third Approved Moraga Project to Break Ground by Year's End

By Sophie Braccini

The Via Moraga project received final approval at the July 20 Planning Commission meeting. Signatures Homes should break ground before the end of the year to construct 17 new single-family homes along Moraga Road, across from the Rheem Shopping Center. The Planning Commission held the last public meeting on this project and approved its Precise Development Plan. The developer still needs a grading permit and other documents from the county, which should be obtained in the fall.

The approval marks the end of a long process for this parcel that used to house Moraga's bowling alley. The almost two acres of flat land next to 5A-Rent-A-Space has sat vacant for more than 15 years, amidst rumors of projects from a boutique hotel to condominiums. The approved Signature Homes project started in 2011, with the developer conducting study sessions before submitting an application, taking planning commissioners on field trips to see similar projects around the East Bay, and refining its concept many times to accommodate demands.

For a few weeks, Signature Homes has been flying red flags on the site, signaling the future arrival of 17 two-story single-family homes between 2,388 and 2,990 square feet, on lots of about 2,500 square feet.

This kind of in-fill development is not typical on a parcel not originally zoned for housing and completely surrounded by commercial activities, from 5A, to a veterinary hospital and of course the shopping center, but it was noted that condominiums and multi-family units that fall in roughly the same category are located up the hill on Rheem Boulevard and along Moraga Road. It was also argued when the project was authorized that there were more than enough commercial and retail facilities in Moraga, as demonstrated by a still-high vacancy rate.

The final project will have a single entrance on Moraga Road to minimize the impact on the scenic corridor, something Commissioner Christine Kuckuk argued forcefully about. Only two homes will face the arterial, while the third lot facing Moraga Road will be landscaped. The project includes a pocket park in the back of the lot.

The Planning Commission includes new commissioners who have not followed the years of negotiations, and who had questions regarding the size of the homes and how the developer planned to facilitate residents crossing over Moraga Road, a recurrent question surrounding this project.

It was confirmed at the hearing that the developer will construct a pedestrian path, with an island in the middle of Moraga Road, and that flashing beacons will signal to vehicles that someone is crossing the road. The details of the road project will be defined with the Public Works Department. Commissioner Steve Woehleke said he always had a problem with this project, but since the Town Council approved it after an appeal was filed, he would support it. All present commissioners approved the project, except Suzanne D'Arcy, who abstained.

Via Moraga is the third development that will begin construction in town this year. With the 27 homes of Rancho Laguna II, and 26 homes on Camino Ricardo, that will be a total of 70 new homes being constructed - more than Moraga has seen in the last 10 years.

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