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Spur in Construction Prompts Need For More Oversight

By Sophie Braccini

Moraga resident Randy Rasmussen alerted the Planning Commission at its Aug. 17 meeting that two roads cutting into the hill at the SummerHill Housing Group construction site, now called the Bella Vista development off of Rheem Boulevard, were dug out by the developer in violation of any pre-approved grading permit. Staff reacted swiftly. The Town Council approved a new construction inspector position on Aug. 26. This person will conduct a more intensive oversight of the current and future developments now emerging throughout Moraga.

"Rancho Laguna II (now Bella Vista) and Camino Ricardo (now Harvest Court) are two development projects involving extensive grading of hillside sites," said Moraga public works director Edric Kwan. "At this time we work with county inspectors, but they do not provide sufficient oversight." The director added that it was particularly true for the Bella Vista development; at the beginning of August, staff was told that a buckeye tree planted along Rheem Boulevard, and intended to be preserved, had been removed. The following week, staff received a number of inquiries about the grading of the two "haul routes" across the slopes and landslides - the ones Rasmussen was talking about. "So we recommend that you approve a new position," said Kwan to the council, "a senior construction inspector, on a contract basis for two years." Kwan added that the town was expecting more development activity starting in 2016 with three other private developments: Palos Colorados, Los Encinos, and 1800 Donald Drive.

"You should have had this person in here two months ago," said vice mayor Mike Metcalf, "(but) these guys don't grow on trees. Where are you going to find somebody? Why do you want to get somebody in-house? Why don't you get someone from a contractor you trust?" Kwan agreed that a consultant could help, but that an in-house employee would be more devoted to the town's goals. Town manager Jill Keimach said that SummerHill met with town staff after the incidents were noted and promised to dedicate an inspector to the Bella Vista site, and to come to weekly meetings with Kwan to alleviate all miscommunication. SummerHill's vice president Kevin Ebrahimi came to the council meeting to apologize. "Mistakes do happen, but they shouldn't happen," he said. "We're going to be here for the long term; we will do whatever it takes to make things right." Council member Dave Trotter said he hoped that from now on everybody would be on the same page and all natural resources would be protected. "I think that this person (the construction inspector to be hired) is extremely important," added council member Teresa Onoda. She said that she would be in favor of stopping construction until all of SummerHill's conditions of approval were reviewed.

Since that specific question was not on the agenda, the council members did not discuss it, but unanimously agreed to the hiring of a new staff person.

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