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Custom Homes Take Step Forward in Burton Valley

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Proposed Lucas Ranch Estates rendering on lots four, six and seven from Ward Young Architects, viewed from the trail head at the end of Rohrer Drive. Image courtesy Ward Young Architects

The original design guidelines from 2006 call for a very low single-story home. While technically the architectural plans meet the letter of the law, there is a substantial basement on the hillside property, which is only partially subterranean, and when viewed from below, makes the home appear to be two stories tall.

Commissioner J. Allan Sayles asked if the home met the single story rule. "Yes and no," replied Senior Planner Michael Cass, describing the

modifications that the applicant made and also noting that the topography is challenging; there is going to be some "under area."

"There's very little impact for the majority of the neighborhood," explained Cass, "but where there is an impact is from the Goldwyn's Property." The nearest neighbor, Bryan Goldwyn, called the home "massive" and that it boggles the mind that it qualifies as a single story home.

Conditions of approval are part of

the application that was approved on a four to three vote, including a privacy study to be completed during the next phase of review along with a landscape plan that requires vegetation cascading down the hill.

"I don't believe the application for lot four meets the standard of a low one-story house," said Commissioner Will Lovitt, who had issues with the size of the 8,600 gross square foot home, adding that he also had real concerns about landscaping on

the southern slope that would screen the home.

Dave George, a Burton Valley neighbor, "really feels like this is an abomination" and that this action is "gutting the hillside protection ordinance." Along with support from other neighbors, they plan to file an appeal to the city council.

"We have done everything you've asked," argued attorney for the developer, Allan Moore, ticking off reasons why commissioners should

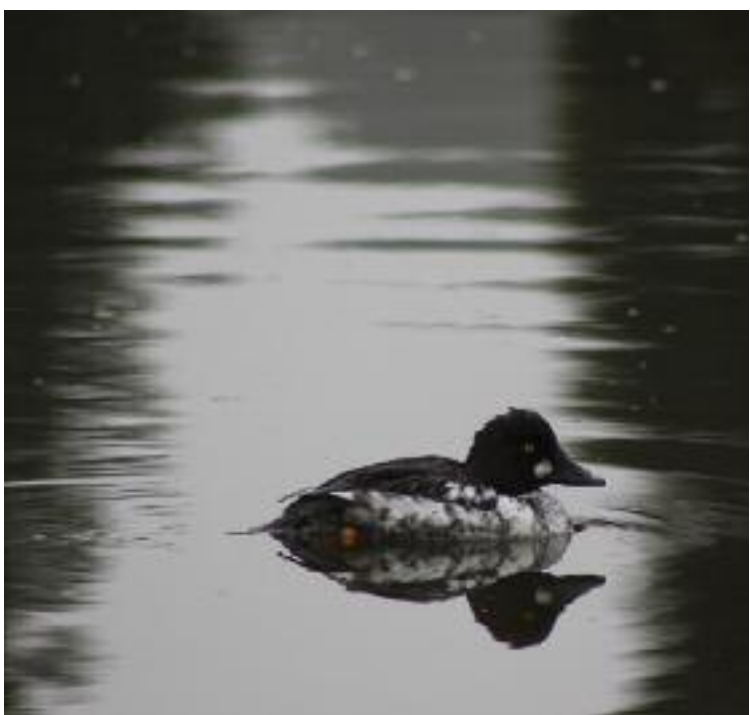
vote for approval: the city council approved lots in those locations, as well as basic footprints in 2006; homes are clustered together in order to preserve open space; lots are sited to minimize loss of privacy; massing has been reduced by more than 20 percent, and more.

Validating neighbors' sincere and valid comments, Moore pointed out that there is a difference between visibility and privacy, noting that adjacent homes are 300 to 500 feet away from the proposed Lucas Ranch homes.

Less prominent homes on lots six and seven were also approved on split votes. One of the planning commissioners who voted to approve lot four, Tom Chastain, clarified that the task before the next review body, the Design Review Commission, is that the house should appear as a one story house, when viewed from any direction, acknowledging that this will likely involve shrinking the size of the proposed home.

Fancy Hats Are For the Birds

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A sub-adult male Goldeneye takes a swim.

Photos Chris Lavin



Many great egrets have ended up sticking around in the Lamorinda area in recent years, preferring to stay put rather than migrate. The birds' feathers used to be highly valued for women's hats, which almost wiped out the entire species. A federal regulation called a stop to shooting them; now global warming is keeping them put.

So while the springtime cacophony of songbirds might be silent in these darkest of days, there are still a lot of interesting birds to watch in the wintertime.

"There's not a whole lot to see right now," said Bill Swearingen, a master falconer who lives in Bollinger Canyon and has a propensity for merlin falcons. "But on the water you can still see a lot of birds. And offshore you're still seeing some merlins once in a while, the ones who aren't migrating. And you can still see ospreys,

golden eagles and bald eagles, too."

But sit in one spot long enough, and you will hear and see birds, Margulis said. "We have 300 to 400 species just in this area," she said, including five species of grebes "and bunches of ducks." So get out the binoculars, she advises, and start sitting still.

The Audubon Society offers local beginning and advanced bird-watching classes, starting now. For a list of classes visit www.goldengateaudubon.org.



Buffleheads disappear in an instant, diving underwater in search of snacks, and then popping up again. If you're with kids, you can make a game out of guessing how long it will take for the bird to resurface.

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