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A scaled-back Saranap Village moves to the Planning Commission

By John T. Miller



Saranap Village is taking shape in this rendering. Image provided

After four trips "back to the drawing board," the Saranap Village project is on track for review by the Contra Costa County Planning Commission this month or in May.

Although some neighbors still express concern over the size and scope of the project, the changes that have been made over the past four years appear to be enough to satisfy most of the residents.

The original plans - which called for a housing structure 75-feet tall with approximately 250 units and a six-story parking garage - have been substantially reduced.

Speaking for Hall Equities Group, the proposed builder of the development, Deb Karbo said, "The open house meetings and community surveys demonstrated that listening is important and can lead to enhancements that benefit neighbors and the economic viability of the project."

At issue is the necessity to amend the general plan, which currently limits the height of buildings to 35 feet.

In a letter posted on Nextdoor Saranap, Paula Santi of the Saranap Homeowners Organization warns that proposed heights in the range of 65 feet may "set a precedent for heights of further developments along Boulevard Way." She urged that "the proposed heights be the exception rather than the rule for future developments in the neighborhood."

Speaking on behalf of the Saranap Community Association, President David Dacus pointed out that the general plan has not been updated since 1991. "Currently, the general plan has no designation for mixed-use projects, which are now seen everywhere in California. The proposed amendment by HEG would apply to all the parcels in the project."

"It's difficult for folks to make a case for lowering the plans (even further)," added Dacus. "The HEG has done a good job of threading the needle of what's appropriate for them to market and would be pleasing to the neighborhood."

The scaled down housing version features 12 different floor plans with more studio and one- or two-bedroom units to address that market.

In addition to the proposed development, Karbo noted that major public infrastructure improvements would be made along Boulevard Way extending well beyond the project site.

By way of historical background, before the 24 and 680 freeways were built, Boulevard Way was expanded into four lanes with plans to create a major thoroughfare from Mt. Diablo Boulevard, through Tice Valley to the Danville highway. That plan was abandoned when the freeways were put in, but the four, largely unnecessary lanes remain as far as Saranap Avenue.

The proposed development would narrow Boulevard Way to two wider than normal lanes with bicycle lanes, three new pedestrian crosswalks, a roundabout in place of a stop sign at Saranap Avenue, and angled parking. The crosswalks would have an island in the center so that pedestrians would only need to cross one lane at a time instead of five.

"All this would make traffic safer and smoother," said Dacus.

Additional outdoor amenities include about 30 street trees, understory plantings, a fountain plaza and outdoor seating.

On behalf of Hall Equities, Karbo said, "It was evident by the public comments that the community recognizes the benefits of transforming Boulevard Way commercial district into a uniquely vibrant and connected community with fine living, small shops and restaurants, and a neighborhood market."

According to Contra Costa County Senior Planner Sean Tully, the next step for the project will be for the zoning administrator to make a recommendation on the Environmental Impact Report, which will happen at

either the April 3 or the April 17 meeting, or at a special hearing scheduled around that time. Tully's understanding is that public comment will not be taken at this meeting. The Planning Commission will convene later in April (or possibly May) and will formally provide the public advanced notice at which time comments on the project will be welcomed.

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