

West County Times (Richmond, CA){PUBLICATION2}

COMMISSION AXES PLAN TO REMOVE 22 TREES

March 20, 2006

Section: News

Edition: Final

Page: a04

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The El Cerrito Planning Commission has granted a reprieve to some 22 trees on San Pablo Avenue slated for removal as part of a proposed condominium development south of Moeser Lane.

Commissioners said Wednesday that the 31-unit development had not justified the removal of the trees, which include three coast live oaks. An arborist report about the trees failed to distinguish which trees were healthy.

"They're either unhealthy or in the way, so let's get rid of them, is the conclusion," commission Chairwoman Kathleen McKinley said.

The project will be revised and brought back to the commission for consideration as early as April 19.

In addition to concerns about the trees, commissioners said developer **Aaron Vitale** needed to give the development positive features to justify his request for exceptions to the city's standards for height, density and parking.

They suggested reducing the scale of the project or including green building architecture or additional open space.

In particular, commissioners said the sprawling driveway in the middle of the development with a strip of green space did not make good use of the site.

"I feel very uncomfortable approving something that has so many things that need to be worked out and fixed," commissioner Bea O'Keefe said.

The project density is 45 units per acre, 10 more than the city's standard. It rises four stories facing San Pablo Avenue and three stories facing Kearney Street.

Kearney Street resident Pat Berndt worried about the potential traffic impacts as a result of the new units.

"We absolutely do not need more living units," Berndt, a 43-year Kearney

Street resident, said. "Commercial would be great."

The development would provide 3,400 square feet of commercial space on the ground floor, which McKinley called a "token" amount.

More than a year ago, the Planning Commission denied an application from a different developer for a dozen apartments at the same site.

The commission denied the appeal based on the building design and the loss of the visual characteristic of the trees, which represent at least 11 species.

Resident Ken Berndt said one of the trees a 36-inch-diameter coast live oak required an environmental impact report, which is a comprehensive environmental study.

"Wouldn't it be a lot nicer to develop, to build around these trees," Ken Berndt said. "You'll have fewer units, but you'll give people in the condominiums something to look at besides San Francisco."

Janet Palma, a consultant who helped draft an environmental study document for the development, said the seven oak trees on the site were generally in good condition.

However, she pointed out that the city does not have a heritage tree ordinance that may protect them.

"The question," Palma said, "is how to design something where there's no conflict for the need for space around the tree and the type of development you're proposing."

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