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Planners call off slated removal of 22 trees

Condo development had not justified request to take them out, commission says

By Alan Lopez
STAFF WRITER

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 Moesser Lane. Commissioners said Wednesday 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 and were not healthy.

"They're either unhealthy or

in the way, so let's get rid of them, is the conclusion," commission chair Kathleen McKinley said.

The project will be revised and come 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."

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The development would provide 3,400 square feet of commercial space on the ground floor, though McKinley thought it was 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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— Alan Lopez

Condo complex wins approval, with changes

By Alan Lopez
STAFF WRITER

Sixteen trees likely will be removed to make way for a four-story condominium complex between San Pablo Avenue and Kearney Street in El Cerrito just south of Moesser Lane.

The city's Planning Commission approved the project Wednesday night following changes made by the developer to the design of the building.

Ken and Pat Berndt, longtime residents of Kearny Street, opposed the development, saying it was out of scale with the neighborhood and would exacerbate traffic congestion.

"Even with the changes the developer has proposed, I'm still not in favor of the 31 units," said Ken Berndt, a former El Cerrito mayor. "One, it's too dense. Two, three stories over parking is too high."

The Planning Commission approved

the development Wednesday with exceptions to the city's standards for density and height.

Residents have until July 12 to appeal the approval to the City Council. The cost is \$208. The city's planning department can be reached at 510-215-4330.

Two years ago, the council rejected an appeal after the Planning Commission turned down a different proposal for 12 apartment units in part because of concern over the loss of 22 trees.

The trees, which include seven coast live oaks, were left over from a nursery that used to be located there.

Following opposition to the removal of the trees at a recent meeting, developer Aaron Vitale reworked his project to save three of the trees — a mature oak along the north property line, as well as a pittosporum and manna gum — and transplant at least three others.

A landscaping plan to determine which three trees will be replanted will go to the city's design review board for approval.

The redesigned project also includes for tenants a gym and meeting room, each 400 square feet. Vitale has also removed what had been planned as a strip of green space in the middle of the parking lot, in favor of additional open space and a children's play area on the north and south property lines.

In another change, vehicles will have access to the parking lot from San Pablo Avenue only and not Kearney Street.

The Planning Commission, which voted 4-1 for approval, still appeared to have mixed feelings about the development, which will also include 3,420 square feet of commercial space on the ground floor.

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Design review board to consider condo project

A plan to build a 31-unit condominium complex with 3,000 square feet of commercial space on San Pablo Avenue south of Moesser Lane in El Cerrito will go before the design review board for approval Wednesday.

The design board must approve the look of the project as well as the landscaping. Planning manager Jennifer Carman expected design review to take more than one meeting.

The Planning Commission approved a use permit for the project last month, allowing the removal of 16 trees to make room for the four-story building.

If the design board signs off on it, the public will have five working days to appeal the decision. The meeting, which starts at 7:30 p.m., will be held in Conference Room A at City Hall, 10890 San Pablo Ave.

A staff report for the meeting will be available July 21. For more information, call 510-215-4330.

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Planning Commission Chair David Brandt said he would have preferred a less dense and smaller project facing Kearney Street but conceded that the developer would then not be getting all of the units he wants to build.

"It's a close call for me," Brandt said.

Commissioner Sojella Maria Silva voted against the approval, saying she didn't believe it provided enough outstanding qualities to merit exceptions for its

density and height.

She cited the building of 25 percent affordable units above the required 15 percent as a trade-off that could have earned her vote.

The commission ultimately required Vitale to build six affordable units, one more than required.

At 45 units per acre and up to 37 feet in height, the development exceeds the city's density standards by 10 units and its height limit by two feet.

It will use a tandem parking scheme to fit the 62 residential parking spaces but lacks the seven to 12 spaces required for

the commercial space.

The building will be 27 feet high facing Kearney Street, and will sit 10 feet away from the property line there.

In addition, two small buildings — one housing a dry-cleaning business and flower shop, the other an apartment on the second floor — will be demolished to make way for the condominiums.

Commissioner Andrew Butt said he expected to see similar projects come before the commission in the future.

"In the long term," he said, "I see that San Pablo Avenue corridor, as indicated by the general plan, will be much more dense."

Hearing set for planned El Cerrito subdivision

STAFF REPORT

EL CERRITO — Plans are afoot for a five-home development between Rifle Range Road and Arlington Boulevard in the city.

Called the Dylan's Way Subdivision, the project would create five residential lots on a two-acre parcel bounded by Rifle

Range Road to the east, Arlington Boulevard to the west, Club View Drive to the north and Lambert Court and homes to the south.

The proposed new lots will range from 10,701 to 17,643 square-feet in size and each would be developed with one single-family home.

Four lots would be created on the western half of the parcel and a new road, intersecting with The Arlington, would be built.

The applicant is Aaron Vitale of Vital Building & Enterprises, which has built several homes in the El Cerrito hills in recent years and is in the process of rehabilitating a corner property on San

Pablo Avenue across from El Cerrito Mill & Lumber that will serve as the firm's offices along with other uses.

The Planning Commission will hold a public hearing on the proposed development at 7:30 p.m., Wednesday, Dec. 5 in the Community Center, 7007 Moesser Lane.