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## Planners Move J&J Ranch Development Construction, Moraga Adobe Restoration Closer to Reality

*By Victor Ryerson*

The Orinda Planning Commission has cleared the way for construction of 13 new homes and restoration of the Joaquin Moraga Adobe, the oldest residential structure in Contra Costa County. After scrutinizing a hefty load of paperwork, on July 14 the commission certified the city's draft Environmental Impact Report for the project, and approved the Vesting Tentative Subdivision Map and a tree removal permit for the 13-home J&J Ranch development. Further permitting will be required for specific activities such as grading, and each home proposed to be built on the site will be subject to Orinda's design review process, but the commission's action gives a green light to the project as a whole.

This is the second time the applicant has come before the commission for approval of the project. J&J Ranch withdrew its first application, which the commission had approved in October 2012, because it was unable to enter into an agreement with advocates of preservation of the Adobe at that time. J&J Ranch "needed an entity before we could enter into an agreement" concerning the preservation effort, explained Michael Olson on behalf of the developer. The Friends of the Joaquin Moraga Adobe subsequently satisfied that requirement, and in March 2013 signed a Memorandum of Agreement with J&J Ranch providing for preservation and public use of the Adobe, as well as the opportunity for Friends to acquire the historic building if it can raise sufficient funds.

Significantly, the size of the parcel on which the Adobe is located has been increased to 2.26 acres from its original size of less than one acre. The structure will be restored in accordance with the U. S. Secretary of the Interior's Standards for Treatment of Historic Properties, regardless of its ultimate ownership, and the parcel will have to be rezoned to permit public use. The 2013 agreement allows for public use of the building up to 30 days per year.

The new application also adjusted the location of certain lots to cluster the housing. This is expected to reduce the impact of construction, particularly by reducing the number and length of roads. The current version of the project is "far, far better than it was originally as a result of working with the community," commented Commission Chair Louise Adamson. The remaining commissioners also expressed their approval, and unanimously gave the nod to each of the items required to approve the subdivision.

The project will subdivide the 20-acre site, creating 13 lots for single-family homes in addition to setting aside the lot for the Adobe, but preserving nearly 40 percent of the site as permanent open space. The size of the home sites will range from one-half acre to 3.4 acres, depending upon the steepness of the slope. Open space easements will preserve forested areas, principally along existing watercourses. Although the easements will remain private property and will not be available for public use, there will be trails and pedestrian walkways for the public. The commission found that, with inclusion of the mitigations in the plan, the project will not have a significant impact on the environment.

The tree removal permit allows J&J Ranch to remove 35 trees in order to perform grading of slide-prone areas and build roads and other improvements. Thirty-three of the trees, including 24 Coast live oaks, are protected under Orinda's tree ordinance, and J&J Ranch will replace these with 71 trees in 24-inch boxes, the equivalent of 142 15-gallon container-size trees. Eighty-seven 15-gallon trees are required under the Orinda law.

Commission members expressed particular concern about preserving views, especially those from the Adobe, and added a condition of approval limiting the height of two homes planned for construction downhill from the old building, so the roofs will not be higher than its floor level. Although some of the new homes will be visible from other nearby Orinda neighborhoods, the commission concluded that the impact on views of the hilly development from elsewhere will not be significant.

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