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Recommendations for the Specific Plan

By Cathy Tyson

Height and density in the redevelopment area would be reduced from the current draft Downtown Strategy and Specific Plan according to the recommendations of the Building Height and Density Subcommittee. Tasked with reviewing the Specific Plan, the Subcommittee took into account views, topography, existing uses and infrastructure. After a year and half of hard work, they came up with some significant differences, in most instances proposed building heights and densities were reduced from the WRT plan.

The Subcommittee's recommendations were presented to the City Council this week (after press time) along with input from a number of volunteer committees, interest groups like the Lafayette Homeowners Council and individual citizens. Anticipating that the scheduled three hour meeting will not be adequate to hear from all interested parties, a second all- day meeting is scheduled for May 9, 2009.

Keeping the small town flavor of Lafayette is a common refrain heard in Workshops and countless meetings, the Subcommittee felt that increasing the density to 65 dwelling units per acre, as spelled out in the draft Plan, "will greatly impact the town, potentially changing its character. Therefore, we recommend eliminating them from the Plan," noted their report. Instead, they recommend 35 dwelling units per acre, with one small exception that is adjacent to the BART station at 45 dwelling units per acre.

In order to keep the scale low as part of the transition into the downtown area, the Subcommittee suggests a twenty-five foot height limit at the Hungry Hunter site and changed the properties next to the Lafayette Park Hotel from 42.5 feet high to 35 feet high with a corresponding reduction in density. Nearby properties adjacent to Highway 24 would also be reduced from 42.5 feet to 35 feet.

The height reduction theme continued along Mt. Diablo Boulevard from Moraga Road to Blackwood including Golden Gate Way, "At the Downtown Civic and Cultural district, we recommend changing the proposed 42.5' height / 45 dwelling units per acre to 35' height/35 dwelling units per acre along the north side of Mt. Diablo Blvd. Our thinking is that the large retail block between First Street and Oak Hill Road (Safeway and Whole Foods) has two protected views across its extent, therefore we feel the 35' height limit should remain," noted the report.

"I think the proposal of the Subcommittee is a great improvement of what WRT has proposed," said Elliott Hudson who attended the Planning Commission meeting at which the Subcommittee report was presented. "I urge the commission to get rid of height increases." Ann Coleman, one of the owners of Diamond K said, "I too am against increased heights."

Tom Chastain sits on both the Downtown Strategic Plan Advisory Committee (DSPAC) and is a member, along with Jeanne Ateljevich, of the Building Height and Density Subcommittee. He said that although the Advisory Committee is composed of over a dozen members with different points of view, they were able to "arrive at a consensus on issues." He said, "It's all part of a process."

Even "Funky Town" also known as the Brown Avenue area would have a 25 foot overlay, to promote its small scale and keep the current structures. The Subcommittee report also spelled out recommendations for the downtown retail district, east end and residential areas.

In a February 24 open letter to the City Council, the Lafayette Homeowners Council noted several concerns with the Draft Strategy and Specific Plan including,

"The downtown as shown is too dense, the buildings too tall, the setbacks, too short." Other concerns included traffic congestion, maintaining a semi-rural identity, maintaining creeks and parks along with a number of other concerns.

"I'd like to see the City do more studies on height. This is not a city that hankers for more yuppie stuff," said Jeanne Ateljevich, Planning Commissioner and DSPAC member.

To view the draft Plan and support documents, go to www.lovelafayette.org and scroll down to Downtown Strategy News.

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