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Struggle with Downtown Plan Continues

By Cathy Tyson

The idea of growth in a "semi-rural community" is not very welcome to some residents.

While a core group of residents pick apart the environmental report prepared by consultants as a requirement of the Downtown Specific Plan (DSP), its apparent opponents have had the same thread of concerns all along the DSP process - traffic, density, police coverage, and especially losing Lafayette's unique character.

Lafayette is not alone - Berkeley and Pleasanton have similar issues. In July of 2009 Berkeley adopted a Downtown Area Plan (DAP) after hundreds of meetings over a period of four years that provided a framework for the area west of the UC Berkeley campus that encouraged pedestrian access, preserved historic buildings, promoted public open spaces and established environmental performance standards for buildings within that zone. Sound familiar?

Although Berkeley's City Council originally approved it, concerned citizens collected over 9,000 signatures to force a referendum. Not wanting to go that route, Mayor Tom Bates asked the City Council to withdraw its support and make some changes to satisfy residents before it's brought back to the Council for potential approval.

When Pleasanton voters first approved a housing cap in 1998, surely they had no idea that eight years later they would be sued by Urban Habitat, a regional environmental justice group, for violating state housing goals. Alameda County Judge Frank Roesch recently ruled that the city had to remove regulatory barriers to construction. Like all other cities and towns in California, Pleasanton is required to have its share of regional and especially low income housing.

Here in Lafayette, although some would like to see no growth, that is not an option. Even if the choice preferred by Plan opponents is adopted, "The No Project Alternative/Revert to the General Plan," that could potentially add 730 housing units, 1,898 people and 138,000 square feet of office and retail space development by 2030. By comparison, the "High Density Plan" if adopted, could potentially allow an additional 4,589 people and 245,000 feet of retail and office over the next twenty years.

Planning Commissioner Tom Chastain wrapped up the recent meeting reminding attendees that all questions and comments will be forwarded to the consultant for response, and that the Commission is going to review the revised EIR before any recommendation is made to the City Council.

The next Planning Commission meeting will be held on April 5, 2010 at the Lafayette Library and Learning Center at 7:00 p.m.

Reach the reporter at: cathy@lamorindaweekly.com

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