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## Orinda Planning Commission Moves Adobe Project Forward Orinda City Council to hear appeals November 27

By Laurie Snyder

Orinda's Planning Commission has unanimously approved plans to subdivide a 20.33 acre site into 13 lots. That site, commonly referred to as the J&J Ranch (Moraga Adobe) Project, will be graded to repair existing unstable soil conditions and to construct the subdivision. The plans also call for "the planting of native trees, in excess of the 29 replacement trees required by the OMC [Orinda Municipal Code], and rehabilitation of the historic Moraga Adobe." Those final six words of that description - long-smoldering embers among Adobe fans and some Orindans living near the historic site - have flared up yet again, fanned via recent appeals filed by Friends of the Joaquin Moraga Adobe and a newer spin-off advocacy group, PAL (Protect Adobe Lane). As a result, the Orinda City Council has scheduled a public de novo hearing for November 27 to review the Project in its entirety, determine whether or not to allow it to move forward, and determine what modifications - if any - can and should be made to the plans.

The structure at the heart of the debate - the Moraga Adobe - is described in the action statement as "a one-and-a-half story dwelling built by Joaquin Moraga, a member of one of the most influential and well-established families in pre-statehood California. The adobe walls of the building date back to 1841, but have been completely covered with stucco. Two rectangular additions dating from the 1940s have been attached to the rear (south) wall. Several structures occupy a portion of the site behind the Moraga Adobe, including adobe and concrete walls, a concrete pool, a large wooden barn (removed in 2009), a one-story house, and a small garage." Although the City earlier designated the three remaining original walls [front and side] of the Moraga Adobe as a historic landmark, additions after 1841 are not a part of that designation.

City Planning Director Emmanuel Ursu observed recently that the Adobe has been a private residence with no public access since 1841. J&J Ranch is "moving in the direction of more public access," he said, through the creation of the "Adobe Community Clubhouse," which will incorporate the remaining Adobe elements as part of a facility accessible by the 13 J&J subdivision families.

The Joaquin Moraga Adobe Pre-Design Report prepared by Carey & Co. Inc. Architecture on September 23, 2010 for J&J project managers (available on the City's website) offers the possibility of greater public usage than current estimates project. Although ownership of and responsibility for the Adobe would rest with the future home owners who would also be its primary users, the report leaves open the possibility that public and private groups could visit by prior arrangement.

Friends of the Moraga Adobe disagree. "The developers are proposing that the Adobe become a clubhouse for the exclusive use of the 13 homeowners of the subdivision," reads the Friends' website ([www.moragaadobe.org/](http://www.moragaadobe.org/)).

Others remain opposed to the Project because of concerns regarding potential damage to the environment. Planning Commissioners in their CEQA (California Environmental Quality Act) analysis determined that the "Project would have a less than significant impact on the environment and that the Project's individually limited or cumulatively considered impacts (when connected to the effects of past projects and to foreseeable future projects, such as the Lavenida Lane subdivision) are less than significant." Future home designs on the 13 proposed lots will be subject to the City's design review process, during which each home's visual impact on the scenic vistas will be evaluated. Eighty new trees will be planted along the new roadway and around the bio-retention basins.

Additionally, there will be no street lighting or bicycle or equestrian trails in the development. The habitats of a variety of threatened species must be protected.

Three pedestrian paths are planned to allow public access to the Moraga Adobe site.

Regarding potential landslide worries, the CEQA report states, "a large area of the site will be graded to repair existing slides and to create the roadway. The finished grade will resemble the natural topography of the hill side." Ursu clarified the action statement further, noting that remedial grading will be undertaken only during the dry season - and will be completed within one dry season. He said a smaller, similar operation north of Stein Way is successfully wrapping up.

To learn more about the Project, visit the websites for the City of Orinda and Friends of the Joaquin Moraga Adobe.

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