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Downtown housing gets the go-ahead

By Pippa Fisher



Plans for the new Lafayette Lane development
Images provided

It was a tale of two city development projects before the council, with lengthy discussions pushing the meeting into the small hours of the following day. By the end of the meeting two housing projects had effectively been approved: one for 166 units at Mt. Diablo Boulevard and First Street, which is to include a large donation to the Park Theater Trust, and the other for 20 units on Hough Avenue, likely to be approved next month.

The council was under the gun at its Jan. 25 meeting to meet deadlines imposed by recent state housing legislation, which caps the number of hearings at five meetings within a narrow timeframe. The two land use items on the one agenda meant the council was unable to get through all their other business. The council appreciated the merits of both applications, with one warmly welcomed, and the other all but approved subject to tweaks, to come back for final approval as a consent calendar item at the Feb. 8 meeting.

At the site of what is now a business/professional office complex known as Corporate Terrace, the developer proposes a new mixed-used development with 166 multifamily residential units (128 for sale condominiums, and 38 affordable for rent units for people with intellectual and developmental disabilities) and approximately 29,200 square feet of commercial office space in five buildings of four stories over podium parking. The development, known as Lafayette Lane, is designed to have a community feel to it, with pedestrian-only areas, landscaping and communal areas.

Providing the affordable homes specifically for IDD individuals was widely praised by the council and by members of the public who recognize the need in the community. Edie Nehls, the executive director of Sunflower Hill - the nonprofit that the applicant is working with to bring and support the IDD community in independent living - touted the benefit of being part of the whole community.

"I really appreciate the thought and consideration that's gone into making this a very usable space for the community," said Council Member Gina Dawson.

Additionally the applicant has committed to donating \$2 million to the Park Theater Trust for the acquisition and restoration of the historic Park Theater building.

The council was unanimous in its approval of the project.

The council was less enthusiastic about the project at 950 Hough Avenue, expressing concern on a number of points. The project will provide 20 for sale units, including three at below market rate, in a four-story structure that backs down to the creek.

The applicant has agreed to allow public access to a deck at the rear of the building, should an adjacent property be redeveloped and requested a waiver for the springing easement. Several members of the council expressed concern over the precedent granting a waiver would set, instead opting to grant an exception. The applicant was requesting waivers on height, setbacks, open space, parking, landscaping and design.

In fact Mayor Susan Candell said she had never seen a project come through as aggressive on waivers. She was particularly concerned with the BMR units, which she said were clearly substantially smaller than the other units, asking for anything they could do to "make it a little more equitable, a little more green."

Council Member Cam Burks agreed with the mayor and urged the developer to consider the layout and equity of the BMR units. "If there's any space there for the developer to reconsider, that would be appreciated," he said.

The council spent considerable time going over, and adjusting wording, and ultimately unanimously supported bringing the matter back to the Feb. 8 meeting with the revised resolution and conditions on consent, meaning that the item can be approved at that time with no further discussion.



950 Hough Avenue Images provided

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