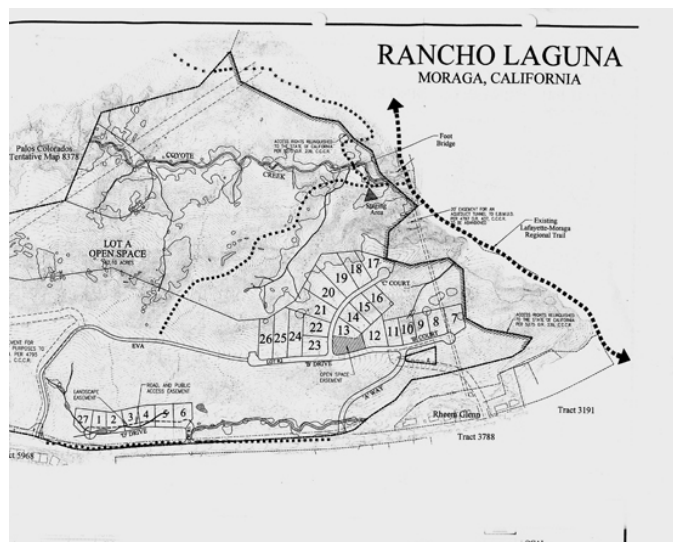


Published November 10th, 2010

Rancho Laguna II: Defining Ridgeline Development in Moraga

By Sophie Braccini



Conceptual Development Plan, Site Plan - Sept. 15, 2010 Map provided by Moraga Planning Department

The October 27 meeting of the Moraga Town Council saw a bitter battle between proponents of different interpretations of the General Plan regarding the protection of ridgelines that are not protected by the Moraga Open Space Ordinance (MOSO). At stake is not only the Rancho Laguna project, a 27-home development along Rheem Boulevard that is currently under appeal, but future development in areas such as Indian Valley and Bollinger Canyon. The Council could not reach a consensus and called it quits at 12:45 a.m. The next hearing is scheduled for December.

This was Council's second hearing of an appeal of the Planning Commission's conditional approval of the conceptual development plan for this project. As proposed, the development comprises three areas - seven homes along Rheem Boulevard (D Drive), ten homes on a higher plateau (called C Court), and 10 homes that sit on a ridge that's mostly less than 800 feet in elevation and that requires grading (up to 35 feet of grading) to accommodate the development. These 10 homes (along what is called B Drive and B Court) are at the heart of the controversy: Does the General Plan prohibit all development on all ridgelines? Does the term "protect ridgelines" mean prohibit development or just limit it?

During the long night of debate, the audience was taken back in time by Bill Vaughn who was a council member in 2002 when the General Plan was amended. "At the May 1, 2002 Town Council meeting, we the council discussed what we had agreed to regarding ridgeline protection and hillside development," said Vaughn, "Mayor Majchrzak summarized the Council's intent; that this language is explicitly to expand the protection to all ridgelines not protected by the (MOSO) provisions regarding major and minor ridgelines." Vaughn indicated that the language could be perceived as ambiguous, but that it was a way to leave some decision-making power to the Council. The record shows that Vaughn voted against this amendment of the General Plan.

In her staff report Planning Director Lori Salamack did not follow that interpretation of the Council's intent. "The 800 foot elevation is one of the defining elements to determine if a ridgeline is regulated under the General Plan," said (now former) Town Manager Mike Segrest when he summarized the report.

The decision rested on the shoulders of three council members, Howard Harpham, Vice-Mayor Karen Mendonca and Council Member Dave Trotter. Mayor Ken Chew and Council Member Mike Metcalf had to recuse themselves because they live less than 500 feet from the project.

Trotter demonstrated a passionate attachment to protecting ridgelines; he would prefer to see no development on either B Drive or B Court. Mendonca indicated agreement that the 2002 General Plan can prohibit development on ridges adjacent to defined ridgelines and she supports the removal of the proposed homes along B Drive, but said that some of the lots "are trickier, they are not in the same proximity to the ridgeline." Harpham has consistently presented a pro-private property rights approach. He supports the removal or relocation of some of the lots on B Drive but not of the homes on B Court.

The meeting ended awkwardly, with a rare occurrence of open discord. Whatever the final decision, the Town could face a legal challenge from either the applicant or the appellant.

Reach the reporter at: sophie@lamorindaweekly.com

Copyright © Lamorinda Weekly, Moraga CA