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County Planning Commission OK's Saranap Village; Board of Supes next

By John T. Miller

Before an overflow crowd of more than 200 residents, the Contra Costa County Planning Commission voted 4-1 to approve Hall Equity Group's plans to build Saranap Village. Commissioner Donna Allen, who echoed some of the concerns expressed by community members at the meeting and wanted a better set of plans to read, cast the lone dissenting vote.

An overwhelming majority of the speakers spoke out in favor of the project, but a handful of community members appealed to the Planning Commission to look into several areas to both improve the project and create guidelines for the future that would alleviate problems with subsequent developments in the area.

Paula Santi, president of the Saranap Homeowner's Association, called on the commission to begin the process for a Specific Plan for Saranap, saying, "This project has been divisive for our community. With so much growth potential for our area, a Specific Plan would make it so we don't have to do this piece-meal." Longtime Saranap resident Jim Changaris asked for direction from the county to keep the height down, watch out for traffic safety, and settle on a time of completion so the construction didn't linger. "I don't think anyone in this building is opposed to the project," he said. "It's just that some guidelines need to be put in place."

Former Lafayette Parks and Recreation Manager Jennifer Russell, who also resides in Saranap, expressed the need for more time to review the development agreement and was also concerned that the project's commercial space be filled with viable retailers. "In (HEG's) previous development in Pleasant Hill, much of the downstairs retail space was vacant for long periods of time," she said.

Other concerns included the placement and safety of bike lanes, the angled parking on the street and the project casting an all-day shadow on an existing structure.

HEG declined to rebut any of the concerns, and the Planning Commission expressed the desire to implement the "Complete Streets" concept from the county's general plan, which involves designing streets for everyone's use.

The Saranap Village project went through numerous revisions over the course of the last five years, and most of the community members praised HEG for their flexibility and openness in listening to the concerns of the residents.

Next stop is the Board of Supervisors. Sean Tully, senior planner with the Contra Costa County Department of Conservation and Development hopes that the matter can be readied for the supervisors' approval for one of the board's August meetings. "This goal may change if an appeal of the county Planning Commission's decision is received," said Tully. "In the event the board approves the project, there would be no additional county decision makers that the project would need to be heard before."

The next meeting of the Board of Supervisors will be on July 18.

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[back](#)

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