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Proposed conversion of an office building into condominiums on School Street

By Sophie Braccini



Simulation of the transformation from office building to condominiums. Images provided

project materializes, including the number and type of parking spaces and where to locate the recycling bins. And since the building is located in a development that comprises three additional similar office buildings, the new owner will need to get approval from a majority of the other owners in order to proceed.

The building, located at 1600 School Street, according to applicant Nikhil Gera, has a 70 percent occupation rate at this time, with most of the space used by the person who is selling him the building. The project would create an 8-unit residential condominium development with units ranging in size from 1,099 square feet to 1,147 square feet. Dan Hale, the architect for the project, proposes creating a second story by adding articulations through the roof. He says that the project would respect what is there, including the healthy mature trees, and would provide smaller housing units with small gardens that do not exist in Moraga at this time but could be ideal for some part of the population.

Planning commission chair Suzanne D'Arcy agreed that these types of units would be great for downsizing seniors. Commissioner Mike McCluer noted that he had been hesitant about the mixed-use aspect of the project at first, but that other Moraga sites such as Via Moraga across from the Rheem Center showed him that it could work well for residents.

Commissioner David Stromberg had some questions regarding the lack of storage space in the units and the parking in the form of carports that for him would call for an apartment rental-style housing rather than owner occupied condominiums. He asked that the architect look at ways to add storage in the back of the carports.

One question that needs to be answered with this application is the zoning. The project is part of the Moraga Center Specific Plan that was adopted over eight years ago and still does not have proper zoning. The project as proposed fits the criteria set for this space in terms of usage, density and height, but it would need to obtain a planned development agreement, like what was done by Moraga Center Homes along Moraga Way, in order to proceed. The alternative, as explained by Planning Director Derek Farmer would be to wait to have the council finally approve a zoning plan. Farmer seemed confident that it could happen this winter, but he added that what is on the drawing board for this part of town was not yet finalized.

Last but not least of the hurdles for this project is its necessity to garner the support of a majority of the other property owners. There are four buildings in this development, one is owned by the same owner as the building proposed for remodel, but the two other property owners have not signed off. In fact, a lawyer for one of the other owners came to express that person's surprise at seeing this project being considered when there is a pending lawsuit active at this time between property owners over parking spaces and dumpsters.

The planning commission recently looked at a unique concept for Moraga: transforming an existing stand-alone office building into an eight-unit residential condominium. The construction of the units located at the western corner of School Street and Country Club Drive would not require a modification of the current building footprint.

The May 21 discussion was a study session led by the planning commission, a way for the project applicant to get a feel about the advisory body's reaction to the project as well as public input. The initial response of the planning commissioners was unanimously positive; they liked the idea of transforming an office building that is not fully occupied with compact housing located close to shops, without changing the footprint of the building or elevating its height.

Many questions remain to be answered before the



Existing office building.

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