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Planning commission approves Terraces, but saga far from over



Photo Pippa Fisher

The Lafayette planning commission voted to allow the development of this 22-acre site on Deer Hill Road for 315 apartments.

By Pippa Fisher

With evident reluctance voiced by several commissioners, the planning commission voted 5-2 to approve

the controversial 315-unit Terraces apartment complex, which is expected to be escalated to the Lafayette City Council on appeal during the next 14-day period.

At the conclusion of a

seven-and-a-half hour meeting June 30, Commissioners Gary Huisingh, Karen Maggio, Greg Mason, Anna Radonich and Commission Chair Kristina Sturm all said they could not make the findings to deny the project under the Housing Accountability Act – a legislative act which has had the effect of stripping local control – even though they found the project not compliant with Lafayette's general plan or hillside ordinance.

Commissioner Stephen LaBonge and Vice Chair Farschad Farzan did not support the project, citing significant impacts to health and safety on the issues of traffic and wildfire.

Plans for the 22-acre lot on Deer Hill Road by the developer, O'Brien Homes, have been riling residents in the northeast end of the city since

2011 when the project was first proposed. They object to the increased traffic they say will impact them as they make their way through an already heavily-traveled corridor and could put lives in danger in the event of a fire evacuation, such as the city saw in October 2019.

The 2011 application was suspended in 2014 in favor of alternative plans for a scaled back development of 44 single-family homes, and amenities including a dog park, playground, playing fields and a car park. Local preservationist group Save Lafayette sued the city, resulting in a referendum on the future of the revised project. With the defeat of Measure L in 2018, the developer resumed the original application for the 315-unit apartment project under the process agreement. The pro-

ject includes 20% of the units offered as low-income housing and as such has protection under the HAA.

LaBonge said he was frustrated that residents rejected the 44-home proposal. Several of the 35 people who made public comments also agreed on that point. Opponents were concerned about traffic impacts, and in an area designated as a High Fire Severity Zone, for potential emergency evacuation delays, as well as air quality, and construction noise impacts.

Northeast Lafayette for Reduced Traffic Founder Kristen Althaus said she was concerned about the questions the commissioner had not asked – such as about how crosswalks full of elementary school children could realistically be safe while drivers were turning onto Deer Hill Road.

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Cost of Lafayette Police Department scrutinized at council meeting



Courtesy city of Lafayette

Vice Mayor Susan Candell

By Nick Marnell

With the city of Lafayette projecting a \$1.5 million operating loss in the next fiscal year, an 11% increase in year-over-year spending for the city police department came under fire at the

June 22 City Council meeting. Questions on the rise in police expenditures came not only from the public but also from Vice Mayor Susan Candell.

"The optics on this are terrible," said Candell, who refused to approve the city's 2020-21 budget because of rising police department costs.

Law enforcement expenses will jump from \$6.1 million to \$6.8 million in 2021, largely due to the increase in the cost of sworn officers. The city contracts its police services on a year-to-year basis with the Contra Costa County Sheriff's Office, which in 2019 agreed to a four-year, 5% annual wage increase with the county for rank and file members.

"I realize we're not cheap. I know that," Lafayette Police

Chief Ben Aldritt said. "My job is to manage the city's money responsibly, and I take that very seriously."

Lafayette's budget for law enforcement includes salaries for the chief, eight patrol officers, two parking control officers, two sergeants, two detectives and one floater, whose hours are filled mainly through overtime. The city discontinued its community services officer position and those duties have been absorbed by the chief and the two sergeants.

Council Member Cam Burks, head of global security for Adobe, does not want to see cutbacks in the police department. "We had two home invasions this year," Burks said. "I would not waver on the costs we're paying for public safety."

Using conservative estimates for revenue recovery, city officials presented a grim 5-year forecast with the general fund reserve balance shrinking from 79% of expenditures to 28% in 2025, while costs for police services were projected to rise from \$6.1 million to nearly \$8 million over the same period.

"We owe it to our residents to reallocate these funds to support our community better," said public speaker Tess Olsen.

The vice mayor agreed, insisting that changes in policing cannot occur quickly enough. "The reasons we've been given tonight that we can't change it, or we can't do it, are frustrating to me, because other cities are doing it," Candell said. The city of Berkeley July 1 cut \$9.2 million from its police department

budget for 2021, and council members hinted at even more cuts to come. In June, Oakland cut law enforcement funding by \$14.6 million for next fiscal year.

With a national outcry for speedy, thorough investigations into police brutality and excessive use of force, and for holding officers accountable for their actions, Mayor Mike Anderson noted that an upcoming Lafayette public safety town hall should produce ideas on how to improve policing, and that the city public safety subcommittee will provide direction to officers.

"We haven't even scratched the surface on this," said Candell, who cast the only no vote on the city's 2020-21 fiscal year budget.



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