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Letters to the Editor

Editor:

I am baffled by the Moraga town council's decision regarding the Rancho Laguna development. Despite our guidelines intended to preserve natural ridgelines, the developer was given the green light to remove up to 25 feet off the top of a ridge so home construction can go forward. Huh? If I altered the silhouette of the Washington Monument or Half Dome at Yosemite to that extent, would anyone believe I was still protecting the original? I guess I'll need the town staff, the two council members who voted for the developer and lawyers to explain this to me.

John Onoda
Moraga

Editor:

I am stunned and outraged by the approval of Rancho Laguna by the Moraga Town Council. The General Plan was meant to protect the ridgelines of Moraga, and lowering the height of a ridge 30 feet to accommodate the developer's desire to maximize the number of expensive houses is hardly the way to protect the ridgeline, is it? It is an egregious abuse of power to willfully misinterpret the General Plan. Former Mayor Bill Vaughn, one of the original drafters of the General Plan's ridgeline policy, even testified to the Town Council, explaining the reasoning behind this provision and that it was intended specifically to prevent this kind of development, but was ignored. It's a sad day for Moraga when the interests of developers trump the interests and ideals of its residents.

Susan McNeill
Moraga

Editor:

When Moraga residents are asked what they love about living in our community they consistently put two things at the top of the list: open space and schools. I want to address the issue of open space.

The Moraga Town Council has recently approved the Rancho Laguna project. This is a major housing development in the most prominent piece of open space left in the heart of Moraga.

You see this open space whenever you are driving on Rheem Boulevard between Moraga Road and Saint Mary's Road. It is a meadow and ridge in a wonderful expanse of nature. We often see families of deer and cows with their calves grazing on the ridge. Under the town's laws, this land is zoned open space, It is designated a scenic corridor and the ridgeline should be protected from development by the town's General Plan. It is also designated a "Priority Conservation Area" by the Association of Bay Area Governments.

At the last meeting, on a vote of two to one, the Town Council voted to approve the Rancho Laguna project. This project will bulldoze 180,000 cubic yards off the top of the ridgeline to make way for 27 houses. Karen Mendonca, who ran for the Town Council supporting open space, and Howard Harpham voted for the project. Only Dave Trotter stood his ground in protecting the ridgeline and supporting open space by voting against the project.

Perhaps the saddest part is that the Town Council did not have to approve this development. The Town Attorney advised publicly that the Council had the legal "discretion" to protect the ridgeline and say no to the plan, It seems Moraga's open space is slipping away one ridgeline at a time.

Jan Blumer
Moraga

Editor,

When trying to come up with something new and exciting for my twins 11th birthday party, I decided I would put together a scavenger hunt around the Theatre Square in downtown Orinda. I went down to visit the restaurants and businesses the week before the party and was surprised at how agreeable they were to accommodate 14 kids running around asking for strange scavenger hunt requests. On the day of the party, the kids were tasked with everything from eating french fries at Table 24 and taking a picture with Victor the owner, eating sushi at Yu Sushi, buying a cupcake from Republic of Cake and cutting it into 5 sections and doing the same kind of thing at Kaspers Hot Dogs. The kids even had to run into Starbucks and order a Grande Frappuchino and drink it down as fast as they could. I was surprised and pleased with the overwhelming support from all the restaurants, businesses and their wonderful staff! They were so welcoming and generous with the 14, 11 year olds running all over the square trying to achieve their Scavenger Hunt tasks. My daughter Grace even had the entire Starbucks restaurant sing her Happy Birthday! At the end of the hunt we ended up having ice cream cake at Loards and took a movie in at the Orinda Theatre. The kids said it was the best birthday party they have ever had or have ever been to.

Thank you to all the Orinda businesses who support our families and the fun we enjoy having in our own home town. I am so proud to say I live in Orinda and wanted to take a moment to thank the Orinda Businesses for making their day so special!

A huge thank you goes out to Table 24 (and Victor), Republic of Cake, Yu Sushi, Kasper Hot dogs, Sweet Dreams, Starbucks, CVS, and Loards.

Kristen Tehaney
Orinda

Dear Editor:

In May, the Lafayette School District will ask voters to approve a temporary \$159 parcel tax. Any school parcel tax proposal should be equitably shared among residential property owners and should close the loophole allowing owners of apartment complexes to pay a fraction of the parcel tax per unit as compared to owners of single family homes and condominiums.

Homeowners and condominium owners currently pay a Lafayette school parcel tax of \$332.04. Yet property owners of apartment complexes pay just \$332.04 for their entire parcel, regardless of the number of apartments. For example, the County Tax Collector's records show Lafayette Highlands on Carol Lane, valued at \$31,000,000 and comprised of 150 apartments, pays one \$332.04 parcel tax -- \$2.22 annually per apartment (19 cents/month). This inequity imposes a disproportionate financial burden on homeowners, more than 80% of whom do not have school-age children. Our schools' positive impact on property values helps all homeowners - with or without children. They also positively impact the value of apartment complexes owned by individuals, partnerships, and corporations, both in terms of value and high rents.

Piedmont School District provides a model for a fair parcel tax. It structured its 2009 parcel tax so that for each unit, owners of multi-family dwelling parcels pay two-thirds of the tax paid by owners of homes under 5,000 square feet. Larkspur School District adopted an alternative model, setting one parcel tax for all residential property, regardless of the home's square footage, but charging an additional tax for each residential unit on the parcel. If Lafayette adopted Piedmont's formula, then multi-family property owners' proportional share of the current school tax would be \$220/unit (\$19/month) and of the temporary school tax would be \$105/unit (\$9/month).

Our commercial properties generate tax revenue and provide jobs. Rest homes and retirement complexes are exempt from the parcel tax. These categories should remain unchanged.

The financial burden of supporting our schools should be shared equitably among all residential property owners, not just homeowners. Requiring fair share contribution from owners of multi-family dwellings would generate additional revenue for our schools and provide the fairness homeowners deserve.

Linda Murphy
Lafayette

Editor:

The Lafayette School Board voted to ask property owners to pay a \$159 emergency parcel tax in addition to the current school parcel tax. Polling by the school district's consultant showed 70% support for the proposed emergency parcel tax.

This is just above the two-thirds threshold required for passage. To gain greater support for the measure and to provide accountability to property owners, the emergency measure should mandate review by an independent citizen oversight committee. Both the Acalanes' parcel tax and Orinda School District's parcel tax mandate a citizen oversight committee. Lafayette School District's current parcel tax requires an "annual audit," but no review by an independent oversight committee.

The John Swett (Martinez) and Lafayette school districts both are conducting special elections on May 3. The county's election division website shows that John Swett's ballot language includes a "citizen oversight committee." Lafayette's does not. Given the amount of money property owners are asked to pay, a citizen oversight committee should be mandated to ensure the parcel tax proceeds are spent only for the designated purposes.

Bryan Tong
Lafayette

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