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Developing Open Space Along the Lafayette-Moraga Trail?

By Sophie Braccini



A portion of the Town's acreage near Rheem Blvd. and St. Mary's Rd; the Rheem crossing is near the top of the trail, on the right. Photo Andy Scheck

Roger Poynts, a civil engineer and land surveyor, presented a plan for five small lots. His proposal considers all Town-owned land along Saint Mary's Road, including the Moraga Commons Park, as a single open space parcel of 40.8 acres. Open space density is one home for every five acres; he said that the Town could develop up to eight homes and recommended building five on a total of 1.7 acres. He suggested that in a time of need, this solution would be better than raising taxes.

In his staff report, Senior Planner Rich Chamberlain indicated that the development may require a study of the environmental impacts if the visual impact from St. Mary's Road was found to be significant.

Council Member Dave Trotter spoke as the representative of the property owner (the Town). He presented himself as a supporter of preserving open space in Moraga, but added that the Town needs funds for capital improvements and indicated that he believes subdividing the land into two parcels for two smaller homes would limit the visual impact.

Suzanne Jones, of the organization Preserve Lamorinda Open Space (PLOS), argued that the visual impact should also be studied from the Trail. "I do not see how the homes could be hidden from the trail," she said. She also identified two groups of important biological resources on the site: a natural wetland, and an area of native grass that she believes would need to be further investigated by a botanist to determine whether or not it should be protected. (Some readers may recall how the discovery of the endangered California red-legged frog on the Palos Colorados development dramatically altered that project and lengthened its timeline.)

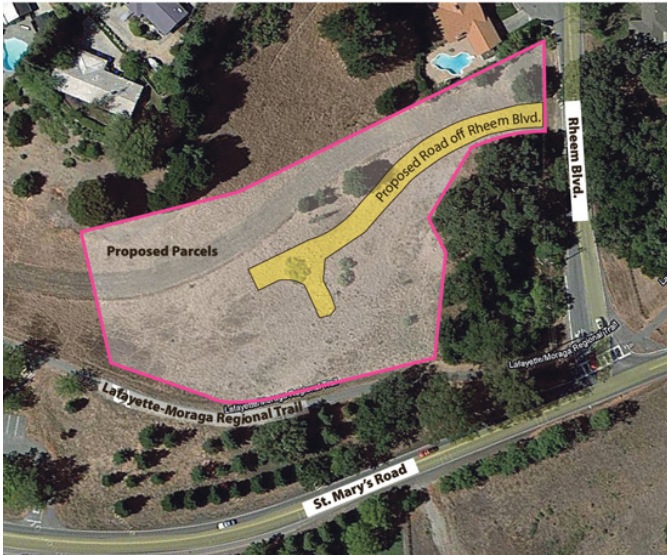
Barbara Onoda, also from PLOS, argued, "How can you find it democratic and acceptable to develop land that was voted Open Space by the people of Moraga?" Planning Commissioner Roger Wykle concurred, and recommended that no lots be carved out of the property.

Commissioner Bruce Whitley told Wykle that although he shared reluctance toward the development of Open Space, the Commission was not asked to decide that night whether or not the Town should develop the property, but rather it was asked to offer the Town a recommendation on how many parcels it should apply for. Whitley, along with Commissioners Dick Socolitch and Stacia Levenfeld, favored two lots. Three commissioners were absent from the meeting.

"The Town-owned land at the corner of Rheem Boulevard and St. Mary's Road is subject to the 1986 Moraga Open Space Ordinance (MOSO)," commented Trotter, "MOSO restricts but does not preclude all development on MOSO-zoned lands. The law does prohibit development on and near major ridgelines and minor ridgelines above 800 feet, and on steep slopes. Those restrictions obviously do not apply to this Town-owned land, which is very gently sloping and away from any ridgeline. As an owner of property, the Town should and presumably will be treated fairly, and any application for a minor subdivision should be held to the same standards as would apply to any other applicant."

The Council Meeting will determine at a future meeting whether or not the Town will develop a plan for the land. "To encourage public input and participation, I endorse and fully support the suggestion (made by Jones) that the Town post a public notice along

the trail at this location in connection with future hearings before the Town Council and Planning Commission," added Trotter.



Map image courtesy maps.Google.com, proposed site overlay based on information provided by Moraga Planning Department; edited by Andy Scheck

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