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KB Home Condo Project Gets Green Light

By Cathy Tyson

After endless public testimony and a private meeting with the City of Lafayette's attorney, the KB Home project was approved on a 3-1 vote at last week's City Council meeting that ran late into the night. Council member Don Tatzin was the only dissenter and Brandt Andersson recused himself. It was down to the wire for the proposed condominium project with four residential stories over street-level parking slated for the gravel parking lot behind Panda Express. Council members knew they had to act before a Dec. 6 legal deadline spelled out in the Process Agreement that governs this project. The approval is conditional upon a complete set of plans that will be reviewed by the council and the Planning Commission, and that both bodies can strongly support and approve.

At a meeting the week before, council members asked for additional simulated views from KB Home from Dewing Avenue and Diablo Foods. They were concerned how prominent the building would be when viewed from different locations in the downtown area. At the current revised height of 55 feet, this new project will be as tall as the adjacent Town Center apartments.

While the history of this particular project stretches back for many years, the developer was criticized for failing to act when repeatedly cautioned that the Planning Commission and Design Review Committee found the building just too large for the site. KB produced the most recent iteration of the revised project that eliminated the fifth residential floor just two weeks before the deadline. Prior owner Lafayette Residential Partners transferred the property known as Town Center III back in late 2008.

Two city council meetings were held that ultimately led to the project's approval. At the last meeting the attorney for the developer, Margo Bradish, addressed the council: "KB has complied with these agreements, now it's time for the city to do the same."

Council member Carl Anduri questioned the developer's reasoning, asking why they waited until October to finally provide the council with revised smaller scale plans?

Architect Jeffrey Heller commented in the first of two city council meetings on a flyer produced by project opponents that had been circulating through town. "That drawing is a complete fraud," he stated. He pointed out the lowest level of the proposed building was drawn higher than it actually is. He explained that the KB Home project will be similar in scale to the existing apartments with an enhanced design, and that it was never the intention for that parcel to remain a gravel parking lot forever - it will either be an office or residential building.

One of the partial owners of the land, Ivan Glover testified that he bought the property when he was 56, now having just turned 76, "I really do believe it's time."

In describing how he came to his decision, Anduri noted that although some residents claim to have just recently heard about it, the public has been on notice of a project at this site, "at least for the last 16 years - since I have been on the Planning Commission and City Council." He continued, "Part of the reason we are here is that we didn't want an office building on this site - there was unanimous consensus that we want housing here." Scolding the developer for last minute adjustments he said, "I'm very unhappy with the applicant and the way they've gone about this." Despite KB's timeliness he summarized that this is a perfect location for high density housing, close to BART and freeway access - a strong beneficial project for Lafayette.

The majority of public comment on the proposed 72-unit building has been negative, citing traffic, school crowding, loss of views and more, but fans of smart growth added their voices to the fray pointing out the need for housing and advocating for a pedestrian-friendly complex that will accommodate the inevitable growth in the area.

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