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Size of New Home Construction Debate Continues

By Sophie Braccini

For years developers and residents in Moraga have been fighting over home sizes: whether to build new homes in size similar to existing homes in the neighborhood, or to maximize the size of new construction. The debate continued at the Dec. 7 Planning Commission meeting, which focused on a new home being proposed by Branagh Development at 68 Vista Encinos. Last October the Design Review Board approved the single 3,200-square-foot home proposed on lot No. 4. Larch residents appealed the decision to the Planning Commission.

The Vista Encinos project was approved in 2002 on seven acres of unoccupied land off Larch Avenue. The Planning Commission approved 10 lots on the uphill property, but at the time no home size was specified, though it was recommended that some of the homes be limited in mass to serve as a transition with the existing smaller homes on Larch Avenue. Regulating bodies have often been unwilling to set house size limits, other than for the floor-area-ratio that is set for smaller parcels.

"We punted on multiple levels, including on setting house sizes," said Planning Commissioner Steve Woehleke, who was on the Planning Commission at the time, "and that was a major mistake."

Built on a steep slope from the Vista Encinos level toward Larch Avenue, the new home looks like a single-level residence from the street, but from Larch Avenue backyards, neighbors say they see 50 feet of home, with a deck, looming over their houses with direct views into their bedrooms and bathrooms. When the development was approved in 2002, it was on the condition of planting trees and shrubs to block the view. The landscaping plan was approved in 2006, but many of the plants have since died and others were deciduous, offering no visual barrier in winter.

Planning Commission Chairperson Tom Marnane said he was ready to approve the project provided that the landscaping is updated, but other commissioners indicated that relying simply on trees and bushes to protect the neighbors' privacy was not enough. Commissioner Woehleke cited the town design guidelines that state that new developments need to fit the neighborhood and not adversely impact neighbors. He said that looking at one project where five sites have been approved for development on the south side of Vista Encinos would not give the whole picture. Commissioner Christine Kuckuk recommended the developer increase the second story setback to minimize the massing as seen from Larch.

The commissioners reached a consensus and agreed to continue the hearing at a later date, asking the developer to return with a revised landscape plan reviewed by staff, and a new floor plan, reducing the visual impact to downslope neighbors. Branagh Development will work with staff to amend the plan and come back to the commission when ready.

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[back](#)

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