

REGULAR PLANNING COMMISSION MEETING, TOWN OF PORTOLA VALLEY, DECEMBER 7, 2005,  
TOWN CENTER, HISTORIC SCHOOLHOUSE, 765 PORTOLA ROAD, PORTOLA VALLEY, CA 94028

Chairman McIntosh called the meeting to order at 8:04 p.m. Ms. Lambert called the roll:

Present: Commissioners Elkind, McKittrick, Wengert and Zaffaroni, and Chairman McIntosh  
Absent: None  
Staff Present: Tom Vlasic, Dep. Town Planner  
George Mader, Town Planner  
Leslie Lambert, Planning Manager

ORAL COMMUNICATIONS: None.

REGULAR AGENDA

(1) Interim Report on Membership Status, Alpine Hills Tennis & Swim Club

Mr. Vlasic reviewed the agenda memo of 12/1/05 on the interim report on the membership status of the Alpine Hills Tennis & Swim Club. He noted that no complaints had been received during the summer about the swim meets/parking. He reviewed the membership counts as set forth in the Club's report dated 11/15/05. Responding to Commissioner Zaffaroni, he said within the current limit of 650 memberships, the Club indicated in the report that they could accommodate an additional five families.

Referring to the Club's report (p. 2, item 3), Commissioner Zaffaroni pointed out that the language should read "...the number of such large events that may take place shall be a ~~minimum~~ maximum of four (4) per year...." Responding to Commissioner Zaffaroni, Mr. Vlasic said "large events" meant 250 persons—not including swim meets. Referring to the report (p. 3, item 3.1), Commissioner Zaffaroni asked whether it was 150 families or 150 people that attended the event cited. Responding, Mr. Vlasic said it was his understanding it was 150 people. Commissioner Zaffaroni felt some of the information in the report was hard to interpret without having the definitions. Referring to the report (pp. 3-4, item 3.4), she said it was not clear whether the overflow parking had been used for the tennis tournaments. Responding, Mr. Vlasic said he did not believe overflow parking had been used, but he would follow-up.

Responding to Commissioner McKittrick, Ms. Lambert said no complaints had been received about parking or traffic. Responding to Commissioner Wengert, Mr. Vlasic said the Club hoped to begin the work on the locker room in the next construction season. Commissioner Wengert suggested the status of upgrade of the facilities be included in the next report as it might affect membership.

(2) Second Preliminary Review (Continued) of Site Development Permit Request X9H-494, Lefteroff, Simonic Trail (APN: 080-040-080)

Mr. Vlasic reviewed the staff report of 12/1/05 on the preliminary review of grading and associated vegetation removal proposed for construction of the access to the planned building site on the 9.9-acre Simonic Trail property (Lefteroff). He said the ASCC had concluded that the basic approach proposed seemed reasonable, given all of the constraints that impacted the property, and would enhance the stability of the road and access to the property. Joint access over other parcels had been looked at, which proved to be not possible. What was proposed also responded to concerns of the Town Geologist in terms of the access and where a septic system could be located. There was also minimum impact on tree removal, but there was clearly a lot of grading and retaining walls; with adequate tree planting/landscaping, it was anticipated that the visual presence of those walls could be screened in the long term. He said the driveway/access had to be completed in order to do further exploration of the well. The plans also reflected the applicants' understanding of what the Health Dept. expected in terms of the septic system and water. He noted that the ASCC had expressed concern about preserving the tree canopy around the residential area to decrease visual impacts off site.

Responding to Commissioner Elkind, Mr. Vlasic said the allowable square footage for the house would be in the 6,000 sf range. Based on the ASCC's view of the site conditions, it was anticipated that it would be a stepped house rather than a two-story box. It would have at least two levels, but it would be constrained by the height limits. Responding to Commissioner Elkind, Carter Warr (architect) said the house would be dug in on the ridge where the stable ground was. Mr. Vlasic used the site plan to discuss the geology and building site. Mr. Warr described the stepped plan to keep the house close to the ground. Commissioner Elkind questioned the feasibility of planting sufficient screening between the retaining walls. On the southwest facing slope, normally only chaparral would grow. The growing conditions would be difficult for a chaparral plant, and the retaining walls in the back would make for even more intense heat. She was concerned about the assumption that planting could be done to sufficiently screen that area. Responding, Mr. Warr said planting would be done on the lower side closer to the road below the driveway. Trees that were 12'-16' would screen the walls on the site. Planting would be done between the walls as well. Coast live oaks on the site grew quickly and were significant in most of that area. Responding to Chairman McIntosh, he said the chaparral that existed had been caused by the cut put in for Simonic Trail. There were a lot of mini slides that had to be corrected because they took out young trees. When the road was put back, most of the hill would be corrected. Part of the reason that location was picked was because there weren't a lot of existing trees. It would be put back to more closely match the area adjacent to and below Simonic Trail. Responding to Commissioner Elkind, he agreed that an expert should be retained for the plantings. Mr. Vlasic and Mr. Warr described where oaks were growing. Mr. Vlasic said the disturbance of the slope between the proposed driveway and Simonic Trail had impacted the ability of trees to find a home. Responding to Commissioner Elkind, he said the Fire Marshal had looked at the plans in terms of access and had not dictated the removal of any trees for fuel management at this point; the understory would need to be cleaned out as part of the process. Commissioner Elkind said that would require supervision and sensitivity. Responding to Commissioner Elkind, Mr. Vlasic used photos to illustrate off-site views. If the tree canopy surrounding the building site was protected, he felt the visual presence of the improvements could be minimized.

Responding to Commissioner Wengert, Mr. Warr said the footprint that had been identified was for the house with patios and was about 10,000 sf. All of the trees inside the footprint that would be removed were marked. There were trees outside of that which would be shown on future drawings; the entire site had not been mapped. He described the dimensions of the building envelope. Responding to Commissioner Wengert, he said the building would be stepped with some fill added against the building to soften it. Broad fills were not anticipated and would not work geologically on that ridge. He described how the canopy would protect views.

Commissioner Zaffaroni said in terms of off-site views and geology, it all came down to the sensitivity of the design and the screening. She also felt trees should be retained for immediate screening so that one didn't have to wait 10-15 years to screen the site. Accessing the building site itself would be somewhat difficult in terms of trying to retain vegetation.

Responding to Commissioner McKittrick, Mr. Warr discussed the heights of retaining walls. He reiterated that visual impacts of the walls could be mitigated by planting trees on the downslopes. The selection of materials would also help. He described where Geofam was proposed so that the road would not have to be widened. He added that whether Geofam would be used had not been decided. He described the where stitch piers would be located. He added that he wanted to retain the opportunity to use Geofam if it appeared it would be effective during the construction process.

Responding to Chairman McIntosh, Mr. Warr said he envisioned draping plants/vines growing down and over the retaining walls and shrubs growing up. For the first wall right on the driveway, there was no room in front of that to screen. He used the plans to show heights of the walls and where planting was proposed.

Crawford Pratt said he owned the property below this site. He said most of the trees that were on that hillside had slid down—including one large one that was still there. Most of the material solidified and went

down the hill. He was concerned about the massive amount of retaining walls. He said there had been comments about putting in stitch piers and having storage below Simonic Trail, which affected his property. He was also concerned about how and when this would be built in terms of road closures, etc. He thought access could be through the other parcel where the earlier road had been put in for that parcel; that was the original driveway that was put in for that building site. As originally proposed, the two parcels were to have a joint driveway. Mr. Warr said there was a dirt road that came up to the ridge, but this property had no legal rights to that road. Negotiations had been unsuccessful in securing access that way. It would also have been strange to drive within 24' of the Palmer House to get up to the Lefteroff residence. Additionally, Mr. Palmer had relocated his water tanks in that road. It had more than 20% grade and would not have provided adequate fire access. Using the site plan, he discussed the geology in the area of the old road(s), and pointed out where the stitch piers, septic system and storage would be in relation to the Pratt property. Responding to Deborah Pratt, he confirmed that the plant materials had not been selected, but it would not be invasive.

Commissioner Elkind said what was proposed on this ridge was not compatible with many of the principles set forth in the General Plan, such as retaining natural slope and not damaging the natural appearance. So frequently now, the cost of doing extensive grading and development was no longer a limiting factor. As a Planning Commissioner, she did not have the tools/ordinances to protect those principles spelled out in the General Plan. Because those rules did not exist, there was no way that she could say this house shouldn't be built. She was concerned that there would be more and more of this kind of application as there was more and more money and people realized how beautiful it was in Town. Secondly, she was concerned about increasing the number of people who needed to use Alpine Road as the major access. Alpine Road was a problem, and it had been patched and repaired with El Nino. But again, she didn't have the tools to be able to say you shouldn't build more houses out there. She did not feel another house should be built and especially a house where the investment to construct it was humongous.

Town Planner Mader said this area was not subdivided under any plan. These were re-subdivisions—some of which were never approved or had been retroactively approved. This went way back to a time when that area was unincorporated. At one time, the Town had a moratorium on developing there, but the Town Attorney indicated that that moratorium could not be continued. The Town also considered doing a plan for this area in terms of improving the roads, etc. A group came forward and said they wanted to do their own plan for their area, but that never took place. In the long run, Alpine Road would probably fail again. Access would be a difficult situation to deal with. Responding to Commissioner Elkind, Mr. Vlasic said the Council had done quite a bit in terms of changing the General Plan and the zoning for the western hillside to effectively preclude subdivision. There were also requirements for geologic investigations for any building that took place on the lots. These would not make the properties go away, but they required that a tremendous effort be made to find a reasonable plan given all of the limitations. In some cases, fire safety had been enhanced by widening roads where needed, providing pull outs, providing for appropriate surfaces, and stabilizing areas so that what was there could be served in a safer way than it otherwise would be. Alpine Road would have to be dealt with when the problems arose. He felt that the Town had done a huge amount to get to this point. Town Planner Mader noted that the Town did not allow subdivisions with substandard road systems, water systems, etc. Commissioners and staff discussed Alpine Road.

Commissioner Wengert said she shared a lot of Commissioner Elkind's feelings. Given the topography, this was probably a site that shouldn't be developed. That said, she said she respected all the effort the applicant/design team had made to come up with a solution—including trying to work with the Palmers. She had enormous reservations about the size of the building being put into a very difficult footprint. She highly encouraged the homeowner to consider keeping the building as small as possible. She did not think this site could sustain a 6,000 sf building in a reasonable fashion. She also thought it would be difficult to maintain the canopy because so many of the trees would have to come out. It was a tight canopy, and just to get construction materials in there would be very difficult without taking out a good portion of the trees. Her biggest concern was the actual footprint on top of the ridge. The retaining walls were also huge. She reiterated that a good effort had been made to try to figure out the solution.

Commissioner Zaffaroni said she appreciated Commissioner Elkind's comments with respect to the General Plan. She said the Plan could still provide guidance with respect to this kind of a project. It indicated that the minimal amount of grading necessary should be allowed. With a site like this, the minimal amount of grading necessary was much more than the Town would like to see. She felt there was probably a certain amount of grading that was anticipated with respect to the building site itself that wasn't absolutely necessary. When people looked at a site like this, they had to understand that it was going to be constrained with respect to what was possible geologically and also possible with respect to trying to minimize disruption to the natural development. When this came before the Commission, she thought it would be nice to have some of the General Plan provisions that addressed developing this kind of site. She also appreciated Mr. Warr's work and the fact that he and the applicant were trying to do the best possible job. She felt that to the extent that it could be done well, it would be. A lot of design issues would need to be resolved at the ASCC level.

Commissioner McKitterick said he had grave concerns about the view impact of the grading for the road/driveway and what the retaining walls would look like. In terms of stability, it appeared that the road/Simonic Trail would actually be improved by what was proposed. The slope might be stabilized as well with the proposed improvements to the driveway. Visual impacts were his biggest concerns.

Commissioner Elkind said her comments were not intended to reflect a lack of confidence in the design team to find a solution in a terrible situation.

Chairman McIntosh agreed with Commissioner Wengert's comments. It was a difficult site, and everyone who had seen it had the same reaction. It was pushing the envelope to try to develop this site. But, he felt all avenues had been explored in terms of access and how to deal with it. He felt the hill between the driveway and Simonic Trail could be stabilized and improved. He also felt that the driveway and walls could be reasonably screened. He said the size of the structure should be carefully addressed, and he would like to see it considerably less. Commissioner Elkind agreed.

Mr. Warr said a very accurate computer model with off site photos could be prepared to assist with the visual assessment. Commissioner McKitterick said it would be helpful to see photos of similar retaining walls some years down the road to see what this project would look like in ten years with screening.

(3) Schedule of Review of Resolution 500

Town Planner Mader reviewed the staff memo of 12/1/05 on the Planning Commission's process/schedule for the review of Resolution 500-1974. Chairman McIntosh said Commissioner Wengert would be working with Commissioner McKitterick and would be participating in meetings with representatives from the Woodside Highlands. Representatives from Woodside Highlands introduced themselves: Mark Dahm, Jean Isaacson, and Jeff Milo.

Responding to Ms. Isaacson, Town Planner Mader discussed the Brown Act which allowed only two Commissioners to meet informally. When the issue came before the full Planning Commission, the hearings would be public. Commissioner Wengert said she and Commissioner McKitterick would meet with the residents to understand the concerns and see what could be resolved before it was brought before the Commission. Chairman McIntosh said it would also help if the residents were provided with the full background and what permits had been issued in the last 5 years. Commissioner Wengert discussed additional background information that she felt would be helpful including types and sizes of recent projects requested, etc.

APPROVAL OF MINUTES

By motion and second, the minutes of the November 2, 2005, meeting were approved as submitted by a vote of 5-0.

COMMISSION, STAFF, COMMITTEE REPORTS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

After discussion, Commissioners and staff agreed the next meeting would be January 18, 2005.

ADJOURNMENT: 9:48 p.m.

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Chip McIntosh, Chair  
Planning Commission

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Leslie Lambert  
Planning Manager