

Embracing Change in Portola Valley

Preserving the character of the town. That is the reason I joined the ASCC in 1985, served on the Planning Commission in the 90's, and have served on the Council since 2010. It has been and still is my primary motivation for doing this work.

Many of you know that I've been in Town for quite some time, and while that doesn't give me any special standing, I do have memories of what the Town was like before 1964, and what it was that we were trying to protect with the famous '64 Consensus. This was a time when the population of California was less than half what it is today. Portola Valley's population was close to what it is now, with lots of young families looking for an inexpensive place to live 'way out here in the boonies.' My father was a Stanford professor. Across the street was a high school teacher, next door on one side was a Lockheed engineer and on the other side, a cabinet maker.

When I was young, I had the good fortune to be able to walk or ride my bike to school every day from our home on Corte Madera Road, That's when the school was located where we now have our wonderful Town Center. Corte Madera Road, Canyon Drive, Crescent and Echo Lane were all unpaved country roads at that time. On our way to school, my friends and I would often see cattle grazing across the road where the Priory now stands. Up the road where the Sequoias now stands, there were open rolling fields with more cows, and an old barn where the Windy Hill parking lot is now located. Jelich Ranch was a working farm, active in the apple business, and sometimes we would stop in, grab an apple and chat with Walter Jelich, whose family had been ranching in the Valley for many years.

After school, my friends and I might wander down to what later became Willowbrook Drive. At that time, there was a plum orchard covering almost the entire Valley floor. We would sometimes work our way up to Alpine Road, to explore the Bovet Ranch, where cattle grazed around the Frog Pond. Corte Madera School and Portola Valley Ranch did not yet exist. We had fun exploring the beginnings of the Westridge development on the other side of the Valley. Or maybe we would go down to the corner store, the Valley Super at Alpine and Portola Road, for a coke, long before Robert's market existed.

This was a time when the remnants of our agricultural past were still vibrant, before 200 homes were built at the Ranch, 35 or so on Willowbrook, a dozen on Applewood, 39 at Blue Oaks, the entire Sequoias development (a fairly dense cluster of housing accommodating more than 300 town residents), plus much of Westridge and Alpine Hills, and more.

These developments represent a massive change to what we started with and were inspired to protect by 1964. The fact that people are turning out in force to protect what we now have clearly told me that we have managed to uphold the '64 consensus pretty well.

Along the way, these developments all received enthusiastic pushback. Most of them were subject to the constraints of our Town ordinances, developed and guided by our excellent General Plan, and they went through the same processes and procedures that are being used to address the current housing challenge. Hundreds of residences have followed this process— including my home, and probably yours. Over time, we have adjusted, responded with constructive input, and ended up with a Town that everyone is determined to preserve.

Today we are confronting the failure of almost every community in our state to adjust to an ongoing housing crisis, so the state has decided it is time to step in and get us all to do our part.

The energy with which some in Town oppose this latest change tells me that cooperatively following the processes established by our founders, and refined over nearly 60 years, is more important than ever. While there are certainly new factors and forces to consider, by continuing with our established protocols for information gathering and public input, our Ad-Hoc Housing Element Committee and staff have been following the path that is most likely to lead to success. Nobody on this Council or in the Town administration wants these changes to be imposed on us, but if we approach it as an opportunity to enrich our community, I absolutely believe that it can be a win for all of us.