

Summary Notes from June 12, 2007 Meeting with Local Architects
DISCUSSION OF BEET* COMMITTEE RECOMMENDATIONS TO TOWN COUNCIL
Portola Valley Climate Protection Task Force

*(*Buildings, Energy Efficiency and Transportation)*

Attendance:

Carol Borck, Planning Technician
Jeff Clark, architect and member of ASCC and BEET subcommittee
Leslie Lambert, Planning Manager
Claire Malone-Pritchard, Stoecker and Northway Architects
John Richards, architect
Steve Toben, council member
Bob Stoecker, Stoecker and Northway Architects
Carter Warr, CJW Architecture
Tom Vlastic, Deputy Town Planner

Overview:

The BEET recommendations to the town council as presented in the committee's Executive Summary (ES), were discussed. All present had received the ES prior to the meeting. The main focus of the discussion was the recommendations to mandate a minimum green building point level for all new residences and "substantial" remodeling of existing residences. Discussion also focused on possible incentives for green building.

The meeting was an informal sharing of reactions by local practitioners to the committee recommendations. It was not considered as a critique, but to gauge the recommendations in light of the rapidly evolving conditions associated with green building, and the experiences of the local architects, particularly with respect to attitudes of their "clients." It also provided the opportunity to obtain data from the architects as to their experiences in different jurisdictions.

In general, the architects agreed that the recommendation for "mandating" a minimum green building point level would not be the most positive course of action. They concurred that a voluntary program with some incentives to encourage pursuit of green building was preferable. They advised that their local clients were increasingly aware of green building practices and were also responsive to the architect's encouragement to pursue such practices with new residential projects. It was also acknowledged that the situation is changing rapidly as cost effective green building alternatives are increasingly available.

All present agreed that the educational recommendations of the BEET committee were important and would prove effective in the long run, as all involved in the processes of residential regulation, design, construction and sales are educated as to appropriateness of green building.

Specific "Mandatory Point System" Reactions

Claire Malone-Pitchard advised that she is a LEED certified architect and has participated in the City of Palo Alto's green ribbon task force. She presented a spreadsheet summary of green building programs comparing several municipalities. She noted that most mandate LEED point standards for public facilities and that many require them for larger commercial projects. She advised that most only encourage green building objectives for residential projects, although the City of Santa Cruz is pursuing a mandatory program. She also noted that Seattle recently discontinued its incentive program as it "no longer appears needed."

During the course of discussion, the following key points were noted:

- The LEED-H residential program standards would likely create a disincentive situation in Portola Valley as houses larger than 2,500 sf start to accrue negative points rapidly with increase in floor area. Thus, any local point program, whether voluntary or mandatory, to effectively encourage green building should be neutral in terms of floor area. (Unless, the town was willing to pursue a fairly dramatic decrease in permitted floor area.) It was suggested that the Build it Green (BIG) program could be considered as it does not include any consideration of floor area.
- The Palo Alto city attorney expressed concerns over a mandatory point system and the City is no longer considering such an approach. If the town does consider any mandatory program for residential uses, advice from the town attorney should be sought, particularly if a permit was to be denied if a certain point total was not reached.
- Any program based on requirements for LEED certification presents critical and costly tracking issues, particular for smaller projects like single family residences. This is the case, because all aspects of the project must be carefully tracked and certified according to the LEED process from the very early stages of project planning and design. For example, an applicant may need to involve a certified tracking entity like the "Davis Energy Group."
- All current residential "clients" in Portola Valley are well aware of the green building situation and are largely willing to incorporate elements into their projects. When, however, it comes to details such as finishes and other elements of critical aesthetic importance, the specific characteristics and appearance become important factors. If fully comparable, cost effective "green" alternatives are available, they will be considered, if not it is difficult for someone to substitute a material that does not fit with their "dream home."
- Three to five years ago, this discussion would not even be taking place, as cost effective "green" alternatives were not even available. Today, viable alternatives are available and in 5-10 years, much of what is considered a "green" alternative will be the norm. (Toben noted that when the Packard foundation building was constructed the "green" elements added 30-40% to the cost of construction. It has been estimated that today, the cost difference would likely be only be 3-4%.)

- Local incentives such as direct grants or relief from design or zoning standards (i.e., a floor area bonus) would not appear consistent with town realities. Vlastic pointed out that Bev Lipman had advised the ASCC on Monday night that the Westridge Architectural Supervising Committee had actually enhanced its review process of projects due to concerns over reflectivity and vegetation removal associated with some recent solar panel installations.
- Clients would likely be interested in obtaining “green” points to demonstrate the success of their projects, but they would likely not react positively to a town mandate for a minimum point level. A program with specific incentives would be far more appropriate and likely successful in achieving town objectives.
- Vlastic noted that for non-residential uses, i.e., those regulated by conditional use permits, application of a requirement for LEED certification should be possible. He advised that typically such uses include larger structures and any approval for new such structures or substantial remodeling of existing structures might be granted with the condition for LEED certification. He suggested that consideration should be given to adding such provisions within the general plan and zoning ordinance.
- Some form of incentives might be considered to encourage clients to consider green building, at least under current conditions. Eventually, such incentives may not be needed for the reasons cited above. In any case, under current LEED criteria it appears that without considerable expense and effort it will be difficult to mandate any LEED standard for residential projects in town.

Possible Incentive Program

The idea of a local, voluntary, point system, that reflects the reality of home size and condition in Portola Valley should be possible. An incentive program should be considered that might include:

1. Expedited planning/ASCC review processes. (Timing only. It is recognized that design standards will continue to be important in the town, but some may need to be adjusted, like roof reflectivity, to facilitate green objectives.)
2. Expedited building permit processing.
3. Fee reduction, including reduction of road impact fees. It was specifically suggested that the valuation of a building permit that is used to calculate fees, could be adjusted to “back-out” the costs associated with key green building items. It was recognized that this would take some careful consideration in terms of how permits are actually valued in the first place.

T. Vlastic

