

PIEDMONT PLANNING COMMISSION

Special Meeting Minutes for Thursday, February 24, 2011

A Special Session of the Piedmont Planning Commission was held February 24, 2011, in the City Hall Council Chambers at 120 Vista Avenue. In accordance with Government Code Section 54954.2(a) the agenda for this meeting was posted for public inspection on February 10, 2011.

CALL TO ORDER

Chairman Robertson called the meeting to order at 6:35 p.m.

ROLL CALL

Present: Commissioners Jim Kellogg, Melanie Robertson, Bobbe Stehr, Clark Thiel and Alternate Commissioner Michael Henn

Absent: Commissioner Jonathan Levine (excused)

Staff: City Planner Kate Black, Assistant Planner Kevin Jackson and Recording Secretary Chris Harbert

PUBLIC FORUM

There were no speakers for the public forum.

SPECIAL SESSION

Public Hearing: Moraga Canyon Sports Fields Project

Per City Council request of December 6, 2010, Chairman Robertson opened a public hearing on the proposed Moraga Canyon Sports Fields Project. As background, the City Planner stated that the City Council certified the combined Environmental Impact Report for the two projects (Blair Park Sports Field Complex and Coaches Playfield Synthetic Turf & Lighting) on December 6, 2010, and forwarded the two projects to the Recreation, Park and Planning Commissions for their independent review and recommendation. The Recreation Commission held its public hearing on January 19 and the Park Commission on February 17. The City Council has tentatively scheduled its review of the projects and all three of the Commissions' recommendations for March 21. The City Planner noted that the Commission was asked by the City Council to comment on the maximum development project studied under the EIR, but could also comment on any alternatives that Commission wished to.

Chairman Robertson then outlined the format for tonight's meeting, stated that each Commissioner has visited the sites and studied the proposed development plans examined in the Final Environmental Impact Report (certified on December 6, 2010). In addition, the Commission has also examined the "reduced development plan" for Blair Park development currently being proposed by the Piedmont Recreational Facilities Organization (PRFO) as well as alternative development proposals submitted by Al Peters, William Blackwell and Chuck Oraftik. Also, the Commission has read the extensive correspondence received regarding this matter.

On a motion by Commissioner Kellogg, seconded by Commissioner Stehr and carried, the Commission approved tonight's meeting procedure as outlined by Chairman Robertson.

Correspondence was received from: Mark & Rieko Haggerty; Chris McGuffin & William Hall; Rick Schiller; Brad Dickason; Erik Wolfers; Roderick Brown; Simon & Wendy Parmett; Uffe Gustafsson; Susan Kahn; Sharon & Stuart Gronningen; Murray Davis; Morrisa Sherman; Karen Sullivan; Scott & Angelique Pine; Lynn Dee; Jim Semiteköl; Neil Teixeira; Cathy Glazier; Gary Roof & Douglas Light; Phil Handin; Friends of Moraga Canyon; Linh Cao-Chan; Karen Cutler; Collin Thoma; Diane Misaka; Robert Phelps; Rob Schenk; Phil Liebscher; Jerry Pierson; Paulette Traverso; Yaroslav Sochynsky; Diana Hiros; Ina Rice; Bruce Rice; Valerie Matzger; Barbara Peters; Joannie Semiteköl; Ken Polse; Alicia Klapp; Wei Huey; Carola Ingram; Susan Garbarino; Al Peters; Shawn Blakely; Narciso Jaramillo; Lin Barron; Helen Danhaki; Bianca Taylor; Nancy Havassy; Dhyana Clark; Cress Kearny; Kathleen Hurley; Katie Barron; Doug Vance; Christy VanSlyke & John Pocekay; Sara Wood-Kraft; Lili Naveh; Margaret Ovenden; Margaret Ovenden/Tracey Woodruff/Andy Madeira/Ray Marshall/Mariam Marshall/Nancy Roscelli/Steve Baronian/Kimberly Moses/Reed Foster/Karen Franchino/Cathy Girt/Kara Christensen; Marjorie Blackwell; Sara Lillevand Judd; Jeff Gao & Huiling Chiao; Matt Heafey; Gerald Friedkin; John Moss; Colby Lavin; Mark Thompson; Ron Peters; Neil Stollman; Jim Motroni; Randy Rogers & Tracy Kirkpatrick; Lynden McLaughlan; Wynne Kokka; Tiffanie Kalmbach; Tracey Woodruff & Andre Madeira; Jeff Parkhurst; Garrett Keating; Randy Wedding; Rodney Adams; Glyn Burge; MJ Dodds; Tony Chan; Leslie Quantz.

Public testimony was received from:

PRFO Project Architect Clarence Mamuyac, Structural Engineer John Sumnicht and Traffic Engineer Michael Moule explained the major features of the "reduced development plan" and responded to Commission questions. During testimony, it was noted that proposed traffic roundabouts at the intersections of Moraga/Red Rock Road and Moraga/Maxwelton are new features designed to slow traffic speeds along this portion of Moraga Avenue as well as facilitate easier exiting from the projects' parking lots. These roundabouts would also link up with pedestrian crosswalks on Moraga Avenue. Other traffic calming methods proposed include the narrowing of Moraga Avenue in front of Blair Park and the addition of a colored bike lane in the uphill (east) direction. It was acknowledged that while the roundabouts and traffic lane narrowing proposals were not evaluated in the projects' Final EIR, they are being proposed as mitigation measures to satisfy the EIR's requirement for traffic mitigation.

Al Peters, Chuck Oraftik and William Blackwell, described their alternative proposals for creating a full-sized soccer field at Coaches Playfield and developing a single (40 by 80 yard) field at Blair Park. They emphasized that their alternative plans would create needed extra sports field space without the necessity of constructing the large and massive retaining walls proposed by the

PRFO project. In addition, these alternative plans have the benefit of retaining much of Blair Park's natural habitat/character as well as providing for the addition of a sidewalk at street level.

Marjorie Blackwell, George Childs, Barbara Peters, Susan Kahn, Jim Semiteköl, Margaret Ovenden, Ralph Catalano, Sinan Sablincuoğlu, Karen Cutler, Brad Olander and Steve Lockhart all voiced strong opposition to the PRFO plan, with the following reasons cited: (1) Moraga Avenue is a busy thoroughfare and the proposed roundabouts will compound current traffic congestion and increase the street's accident potential; (2) options exist for Piedmont sports groups to join with other cities, such as Emeryville, in finding or developing more appropriate sites for sports fields; (3) inconsistencies with the City's General Plan; (4) the complications and costs involved with relocating private sewer laterals and utility service lines; (5) the unattractiveness of high and massive retaining walls bordering an important entrance into Piedmont; (6) inadequate mitigation of the traffic/pedestrian safety concerns cited in the EIR; (7) too much destruction of Blair Park's natural woodland setting as well as the increased risk of causing hillside instability; (8) the need for an independent traffic study to evaluate pedestrian safety issues; (9) the fact that the proposed Blair Park development imposes too much potential liability risk to the City in terms of traffic, pedestrian safety and hillside stability issues; (10) concern over future Blair facility maintenance cost burdens on City taxpayers; and (11) the severe impacts on surrounding neighborhoods.

In addition, Messrs. Childs and Semiteköl also opposed the proposed field lighting at Coaches Playfield, believing that the lights would be intrusive on the surrounding neighborhood and their installation would be in direct violation of a City Council promise made at the time field construction was approved that field lighting would never be installed.

John Constantine and Sue Meckel as well as several speakers listed above who opposed the PRFO project, voiced support for the Alternative Plans, believing them to be a better solution than the PRFO proposal for providing the same amount of field capacity while reducing impacts on the surrounding neighborhood and streetscape. Ms. Meckel also referenced the community's pressing pool needs in urging that the City allocate its sports resources carefully.

Steve Schiller, Steve Ellis, Eric Havian, Mark Landheer and Glyn Burge urged Commission endorsement of the PRFO plan, stressing the benefits to the community of a privately funded multi-use recreational facility that would serve the needs of all age groups, the fact that the plan will privately fund solutions to Moraga Avenue's traffic problems and provide much needed sports fields so that no Piedmont child is turned away who wants to play baseball, softball or soccer. They felt that the Alternative Plan(s) do not provide the same level of recreational benefit, would be more costly to construct, fail to address Moraga Avenue traffic speeds, would decrease, rather than enhance, youth baseball opportunities and lack the financial backing to come to fruition. They stressed that all alternative non-Piedmont field options have been exhaustively explored for years and simply do not exist -- there is simply no field space or times

available outside of Piedmont for Piedmont teams to utilize. They also emphasized that future facility maintenance costs would be privately funded through user fees. They voiced concern that delaying a decision on the PRFO plan so that the Alternative Plans can be adequately examined, including the likelihood that a full EIR would be required, could seriously jeopardize the funding of the PRFO project because of lost of interest and support by current and prospective donors. Also, the pending loss of Alameda Point soccer fields makes it critical that field replacements be in place as soon as possible. They added that it is unlikely that supporters of the PRFO plan would fund an analysis of the Alternative Plans because these plans do not satisfy the sports needs of these donors.

Rick Schiller urged that a supplemental EIR be authorized to examine the proposed roundabout traffic elements and requested that the Blair Park story poles be modified to provide a clearer definition of the project for better visualization of aesthetic impacts.

Corey Johnson referenced seismic safety concerns associated with the PRFO project's large retaining walls and fill in requesting that if the PRFO project is approved, the City require the same standards for bonding, liability insurance, etc. as it does for private residential projects.

Robert McBain, Chairman of the Recreation Commission, clarified that the Coaches Playfield Turf & Lighting Project is a City project, not initiated by the PRFO. However, for cost and CEQA compliance reasons, the two projects were combined into one Environmental Impact Report.

The Commission acknowledged the need and benefit of the proposed recreational amenities contained in the PRFO plan studied under the EIR but felt that unfortunately the proposed plan is not appropriately scaled for the site, represents an overdevelopment of Blair Park, its proposed traffic plan creates circulation problems for the surrounding neighborhood and the mass and height of its retaining walls do not fit within the context of the site or neighborhood. In particular, the Commission noted the following problems with/objections to the PRFO proposal:

Overdevelopment of the Site:

- insufficient perimeter spacing around the large soccer field to accommodate coaches, players and spectators as well as the proposed landscaping designed to screen the project's enormous retaining wall at the south end of the field;
- the massive size, height and number of proposed retaining walls, some with extensive pier supports and tie-backs that might encroach onto private property. In addition, the construction drilling process for these walls could possibly make the hillside seismically weaker;
- the realignment of private sewer laterals and storm drain lines is a significant construction issue;

- the earthen berm along Moraga Avenue will have to be mechanically stabilized because of its 1:1 slope and this factor along with its north facing exposure makes it unrealistic to expect that attractive, flowering landscaping as indicated on project renderings will be able to successfully mitigate the visual appearance of such mass and height at the street edge;
- a 30 ft. elevation increase in the stairway leading from the parking lot to the playfield, is impractical;

Public Safety:

- a retaining wall construction process that imposes a significant risk for potentially damaging residential properties, thus creating tremendous liability exposure for the City;
- traffic congestion and accident potential at the parking lot entrances/exits due to poor sight line distances, the overlap of time between when one game ends and new players arrive for the next game and the larger size/capacity of the parking lots in the reduced development plan;
- the possibility that because of parking lot congestion, parents will let their kids out of the car in the middle of street;
- the 6% slope of the west parking lot;
- the potential danger of making the traffic lanes along busy Moraga Avenue narrower than their current width and creating a bike lane along this busy roadway;
- the possibility that pedestrians would walk along the street rather than climb the steep stairway to access the playfield, even though there would be no sidewalk at street level and the Moraga traffic lanes would be narrower than currently existing;
- the proposed grass glade is unfenced with the chance that children could chase wayward balls into the street;
- the addition of roundabouts represents a major change to Moraga Avenue and as such should be subject to an amended EIR examination;
- in accordance with the Final EIR, in order for the City to approve the PRFO project, it would be necessary to sign a *Statement of Overriding Consideration* which is not advisable;
- in accordance with the findings of the Final EIR, the proposed project involves significant potential liability and traffic impacts which are not mitigated;

General Plan:

- the proposed project conflicts with City General Plan policies and goals related to traffic, sidewalks, bike routes, open space and natural habitat preservation, recognizing Moraga Canyon as a natural habitat, passive and active recreation opportunities and environmentally sensitive construction.

During discussion, the following suggestions were mentioned as ways to improve the PRFO proposal: provide a sidewalk at street level; reduce the size of the soccer field; include a pedestrian path off of Blair/Alta/Scenic similar to the Spring Path to Coaches Playfield; consider the use of speed bumps or stop signs to slow traffic speeds along Moraga Avenue; provide for the planting of evergreen rather than deciduous trees/landscaping to maximize the effectiveness of the vegetation screening of the Moraga Avenue retaining walls.

In general, the Commission was divided in its support of any development in Blair Park. Some felt that development along the lines of the Peters/Blackwell alternative plan may be acceptable, especially if the proposed sports field at Blair was a 60' baseball diamond, while another felt that no amenities should be added at Blair that would entice pedestrians to cross Moraga Avenue in order to access recreational facilities. Overall, the Commission felt that more examination of potential development options in Blair Park that would reduce visual impacts, lessen the necessity for high retaining walls (especially at street level) and retain much of the existing park's oak trees and natural habitat should be conducted before consideration is given to approving the PRFO proposal.

The Commission also felt that if the Council proceeds in approving the PRFO or any alternative development proposal for Blair Park, said projects include conditions of approval addressing private property protections, hillside stability precautions, bonding requirements and liability insurance guarantees.

As to the Coaches Playfield Turf & Lighting Project, the Commission preferred that this project be considered within the context of whatever is developed at Blair Park as an integrated whole and not be pursued independently.

Resolution 3-PL-11

RESOLVED, that the Piedmont Planning Commission recommends to the City Council that the Piedmont Recreation Facilities Organization's plan as set forth in the EIR is inappropriate and should not be approved for the following reasons:

- it is too large for the site, particularly as it relates to the positioning of the full-sized soccer field, which requires an unnecessarily high retaining wall at the south property line and an unnecessarily high retaining wall and berm too close to the south curb line on Moraga Avenue. These unnecessarily high retaining walls cause multiple impacts related to traffic flow, pedestrian safety and intrusion into natural habitat;
- its non-conformance with General Plan Policies and Goals:
 - 3.5 (protection of open space)
 - 4.3 (Moraga Canyon)
 - 7.1 (balancing travel modes)
 - 10.1 (sidewalks)
 - 10.4 (bike routes)
 - 10.5 (bicycle infrastructure)
 - 15.1 (transportation control measures)
 - 23.1 (balancing active and passive recreation)

23.3 (environmentally-sensitive park design)

23.7 (non-park open space)

24.5 (organized versus casual park use)

- its failure to comply with the intent of City Code Section 17.20.1 in terms of aesthetics and respecting the natural beauty and visual character of the property;
- the unmitigatable impacts associated with natural habitat/open space preservation, traffic flow and pedestrian safety as set forth in Final Environmental Impact Report Mitigation Measures and Impacts REC-2, PUB-1, TRAFF-1, TRAFF-2A and TRAFF-3. These traffic/pedestrian safety issues as they relate to Moraga Avenue are not clearly resolved in the proposed or revised plan and thus require significant additional research to verify that improvements such as the proposed roundabouts would fit within the overall context of the EIR's research on traffic and that it would be acceptable and feasible to incorporate these features onto Moraga Avenue. Therefore, there is not adequate information to indicate that this project is viable.
- EIR Mitigating Measure GEO-1 in terms of its potential impact to damage adjacent properties (as cited in the Commission's discussion) because of the positioning and construction of retaining walls at the south end of the property;

RESOLVED FURTHER, that the Planning Commission recommends that the City Council consider the proposed Coaches Playfield Turf & Lighting Project as an integrated whole with any Blair Park development, with the understanding that there is an opportunity for Coaches Playfield to enhance recreational and sport use within the community within the context of the overall Moraga Canyon development.

Moved by Kellogg, Seconded by Thiel

Ayes: Kellogg, Robertson, Stehr, Thiel, Henn

Noes: None

Absent: Levine

In the event the City Council approves the PRFO development proposal for Blair Park, the Commission strongly recommended that specific conditions of approval be attached to said approval.

Resolution 4-PL-11

RESOLVED, that the Planning Commission recommends that if the City Council approves the PRFO development project for Blair Park, said project be referred back to the Commission for further guidance and recommendation.

Moved by Thiel, Seconded by Stehr

Ayes: Kellogg, Robertson, Stehr, Thiel, Henn

Noes: None

Absent: Levine

ADJOURNMENT

There being no further business, Chairman Robertson adjourned the meeting at 11:15 p.m.