

Planners bend rules a bit, approve 86-unit project

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Watsonville's need for housing won out over development standards last night, with the Planning Commission's approval of an 86-unit townhouse project that includes a private driveway in place of a standard street.

Called Green Valley Homes, the proposed project is located on an 11.4-acre parcel between Pennsylvania Drive and Green Valley Road. The project calls for 28 two-bedroom townhouses and 58 three-bedroom, with 28 of the larger homes having dens, which planners considered as bedrooms when figuring how many parking spaces to require.

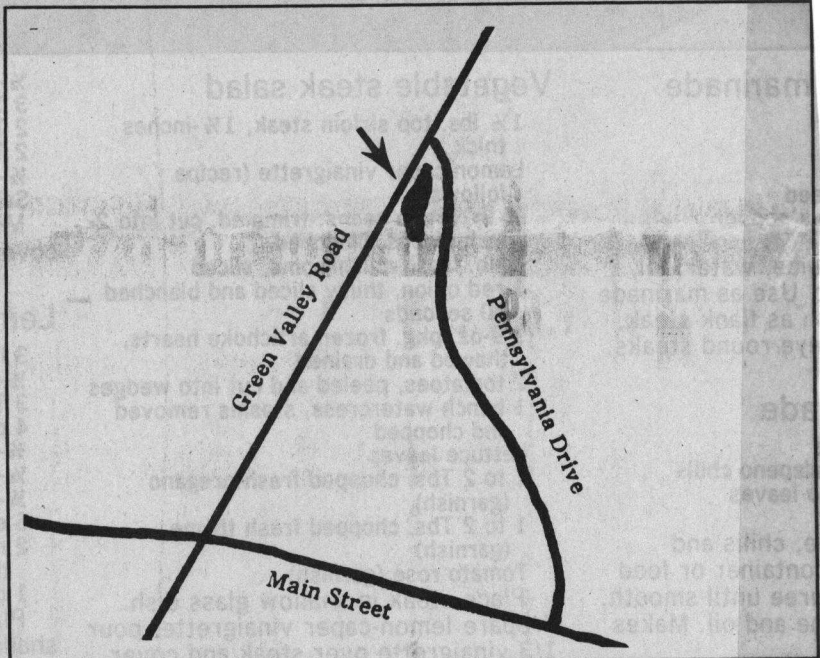
City planners recommended against the project's design because, while 82 of the units front a public street, access to the remaining four would be from a driveway. City standards allow a driveway access only when the entire project is four units or less, planners said.

However, project engineer David Wray argued that while such a restriction might make sense from a city-policy standpoint, it makes no sense from a design standpoint.

"I fail to see where the number of units has anything to do with design," he said.

It's his opinion that city standards would allow driveway access to four units regardless of the size of a project, he said, "and we designed our plans around that and we're ready to go to construction, hopefully, next month."

Removal of the four units in question, as recommended by planners, would drive up the price of the remaining townhouses from the estimated \$130,000 to \$150,000, Wray added.



Development would nestle in the corner of Green Valley Road and Pennsylvania Drive.

"The problem I see with that is there's plenty of space there for four houses," he said. "And we do need houses in this town; we're running out of space."

Removing two units in front would make room for a street, but would require five feet of "fill" to raise the grade the required amount, Wray said, calling it a "catch-22" situation.

"We've looked at all kinds of layouts for this area," he said, "and this became the most efficient one to get these units in."

Planner Maureen Owens explained that the project is a redesign of one approved by the City Council last November, which included a 19-foot retaining wall along Green Valley Road. The wall was dropped after soil engineers determined that the soil in the area would not support the wall without either "great expense" or posing a "potential liability," Owens said.

It was decided to replace the proposed retaining wall with a slope of compacted dirt, Wray said.

The result included a loss of some space for the project and dictated its redesign. However, Wray said a playground was moved to a safer area and increased in size from two-fifths to seven-tenths of an acre. A guest parking lot was also moved from the Pennsylvania Drive entrance to a cul-de-sac.

As to planners' assertion that the project would be three parking spaces short of the required 243 spaces, Wray said he would redesign a portion of the street connecting the project to Pennsylvania Drive to fit those spaces in.

Commissioner James Brugler said the developer deserved "his day in court" before the council, and commissioners voted unanimously in favor of the project's master plan and 4-2 in favor of its tentative map, or design, contingent on the council's approval of the driveway access.

Commissioners Marie Williams and George Sakata cast the dissenting votes; Commissioner Lupe Flores was absent.

Planning Director Bud Carney said the project would be on the council's July 26 agenda.

REFERENCE