

## Letter Regarding Proposed Lennar Homes Development and its Context within Mt. Diablo Blvd. Development

We appreciated getting the information about city planning and development in the most recent issue of Lafayette Vistas (Spring, 2014 edition). It was a relief to know that Lafayette's plans are not dictated by any obligations to the State, ABAG, the Metropolitan Transportation Commission or anyone else. As stated in the article, the citizens of Lafayette, together with our neighbors holding elected and volunteer positions, are the ones who determine our present and future actions.

In keeping with this principle, we have attended regularly scheduled meetings of the Lafayette Circulation Committee, Design Committee and Planning Commission to participate in the process of assessing upcoming plans for city development. We were there to express opinions about a particular project--the possible Lennar development at the corner of Mt. Diablo Blvd. and Dolores -- as well as the broader set of developments that have/will take place along the length of the Mt. Diablo Blvd. corridor. (According to Google maps, this corridor is less than 1 square mile. The length from Paulson Court on the west to Pleasant Hill Road on the east is 3.2 miles. The width, measured from the intersection of Deer Hill and Oak Hill Roads on the north to Chow on the south is 0.3 miles. Total area is 0.96 of a mile, which is 6.3% of Lafayette's total 15.22 square mile area.)

The Vistas article noted that developments approved to date are in keeping with plans established ten years ago (2004) and that specific structures are allowed by regulations established 40 years ago. We believe that a plan is a great tool for setting direction -- however the proactive practice of on-going planning is equally critical. Former President Eisenhower was even more emphatic, when he said "Planning is everything." He didn't say "the Plan is everything"; he prioritized the act of planning, of making adjustments based on current events, results and other information. If you made a plan to get exercise by jogging around the Lafayette Reservoir and a lightning storm occurred -- you could doggedly follow "the plan" at some risk to your wellbeing, or you could re-plan and go to a yoga class at Absolute Center instead.

The Vistas article speaks at length to why increased development is desirable in Lafayette. We aren't saying there should be no new development. But development in Lafayette has reached a tipping point, which makes it particularly crucial to think about where we are, what each new decision could mean, and whether we all want those consequences for Lafayette.

The Vistas article also speaks about the demand for living space in Lafayette, by developers who believe this is a very profitable area for their projects and by consumers who want to become Lafayette residents. It's great that Lafayette can attract interested developers, and that we have a lot to offer them. That being the case, we think this also gives Lafayette the ability to determine what our needs are -- and have the luxury of developers being willing to meet our needs while still being able to achieve their revenue per square foot goals. And let's be realistic. A huge company like Lennar, headquartered as far across the country as it's possible to be, in Miami, can't really know or be concerned about Lafayette's character and preserving the qualities that make this city so special.

We're fortunate to not be a city where we have to do whatever developers want, for fear we won't get any developers to help improve our surroundings. We should keep this advantage in mind as we plan and as we finalize any deals with development companies.

To that end, **(1) we're in favor of low-rise structures**, so we can see our hills from the street and avoid the non-rural feel of buildings coming right up to the sidewalk and looming over pedestrians. Many of the 3-story

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developments that have gone up since Lafayette Mercantile do exactly this. And it seems that every new development involves 3 stories, including all of those listed in the Vista's article, which adds to the "high rise" feeling and loss of views along Mt. Diablo Blvd.

The new commercial building near the Veteran's Hall, with the "silo" outside, has minimal space between the building and the sidewalk. Same for Belle Terre. And when we're in La Boulange (Lafayette Mercantile building), we have to ask "would we have any less enjoyment and would this restaurant be harmed in any way if the ceiling were lower by 5 or 6 feet?" We honestly can't see the benefit to any party of the Mercantile's height, and it obliterates any view to the greenery on the Brook Street rise.

If Lafayette agrees to 3-story structures, can they be much farther back from the sidewalk to avoid the overbearing feel created by some of the new buildings? Can they be placed where views aren't diminished? Can developers be asked to give solid reasons why a ceiling needs to be exceptionally high?

What does Lafayette gain by going even higher, to 5 stories (4 stories plus parking)? – why did we feel compelled to grant that exception for the development going up behind Panda Express? We sincerely hope this doesn't set a "precedent" where we then "have to" give in to the next developer who says "You allowed 5 stories behind Panda, I want the same treatment."

**(2) We're in favor of low-density**, to maintain our semi-rural character and, pragmatically, to minimize the hassle of driving down Mt. Diablo Blvd. or finding parking in the Safeway or CVS lots. There's a lot of discussion about Mt. Diablo Blvd. being a walking environment for residents in the immediate area. We're avid walkers and runners, and probably fit the exact profile being referenced. So we can tell you it's just not practical to go grocery shopping, or even to buy a few things at CVS – try managing a bottle of bleach, a box of laundry detergent and a value pack of paper towels – without a car.

According to one of Lafayette's transportation planners (quoted in the April 2014 edition of Lafayette Today) 23,800 cars use Mt. Diablo Blvd., east of Moraga Road, in a 24-hour period. Stands to reason that at least that many cars are on Mt. Diablo Blvd. to the west of Moraga Road in a 24-hour period. Since all the developments listed in the Vistas article are on Mt. Diablo Blvd. itself and residents must use it to get in/out of their complexes, we'll have a minimum of 400 more cars added, and this number could easily exceed 700. As it is, there are 9 stop lights between Dolores Drive and Brown Avenue--one on every street corner, one every 590 feet--which is a reflection of the current congestion.

There were few stop lights 40 years ago, when aspects of the city plan were established. Understandably, it would have been hard for planners at that time to have envisioned the current situation created by their decisions.

Traffic congestion has also resulted in a surprising number of accidents, close to one each day in Lafayette. Parking lots are already jammed, before the additional volume from the 412 new residences. This all adds to a stressful environment that is much more urban than semi-rural. And to that point, Diablo magazine just published an article on the "urban living" that one can now experience in places like Lafayette. This would seem to be where we're headed: allowing our semi-rural green hills/great schools to be morphed into a standard urban environment.

**(3) We're in favor of low-impacts** to our schools, our current businesses and our open spaces. And we're distressed to see that with Lafayette's infrastructure already stressed at present, the new development plans will increase the pressure.

Schools, for one. The Visa article cites an Acalanes School District study that projects an incremental 78 students K-8 as the result of planned development. Not sure how the district got to 78, but here's what we think is indicated by the U.S. Census findings for Lafayette:

- The average Lafayette family household has 3.02 people.
- In Lafayette, 20% of the population is between the ages of 5 and 18, and 24.9% are infant-to-18 years of age.
- Per the Vistas summary, there are 412 new housing units planned. If we take out the senior / assisted living housing, it's 277 units.
- According to the Census, we can expect the 277 non-senior units to bring 837 additional people to Lafayette. That would mean 216 more children under the age of 18 and an added 167 children in classes K-12 at any given time.

167 additional school-age children may not seem like a lot, however the Acalanes School District is currently asking for more money for elementary, middle, and high schools. Voters are being asked to extend Measure A and Measure B. Measure A and Measure B were originally approved in 2010 as temporary emergency measures. Money was needed, in part, because "maximum class sizes have been significantly increased and by next year will reach 31-33 in English, world history, math and science". Note that the average class size across the state of California is 24. Are we maintaining "great schools" if we have class sizes of 31-33 compared with 24 in other cities?

Today we are being asked to extend and increase these taxes because "Measure A and Measure B are "essential to maintain our outstanding neighborhood schools ... it will provide vital funding to preserve manageable class sizes." The point here is every new student is an incremental student that will require additional resources – we have no excess capacity. Students are already being put on wait list at Happy Valley Elementary.

To put it in perspective, 77 additional new students is an 18% increase vs. the current attendance at any one of our elementary schools. 167 more children is the equivalent of increasing attendance at any one of our elementary schools by 36%. And this is only for currently known housing developments. Future years and future development will compound this.

Whether the increase will be 77 children, 167 children or some other number, the city acknowledges that developers are trying to cash in on Lafayette's schools. Steve Falk (City Manager): "Because Lafayette voters have stepped up and funded the schools, housing developers are now rushing the doors. People who value education are moving here. Developers see the chance to make money."

There's nothing wrong with more families and developers wanting to be in Lafayette. The point is that if we're not careful with our decisions, we'll undermine the very things that make Lafayette attractive to residents and businesses.

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The Vistas article noted that we're "only" adding 4% to Lafayette's housing stock. However, we're doing it within an area that's less than 1 square mile in area and already burdened with more than 23,000 cars in a 24-hour period. Most of the developments involve 3 stories, adding to the optics of crowding and diminishing views to our green hills.

Regarding the Lennar proposal in particular, it's another 3-story development with potential to block views of the hill behind it. Even with the most recent change from 70 to 66 units it will be more dense than the development at Deer Hill and Pleasant Hill Roads.

We're surprised that Lennar's traffic monitoring on March 13-14 was deemed appropriate. Among the measurement issues we noted:

- The sensors did not pick up all traffic in/out of the building on the northeast corner (Absolute Fitness and other businesses) – on the first day, the sensor missed both driveways for this building and on the second day, it only monitored the underground parking traffic.
- The monitoring did not pick-up traffic that went through Celica's parking lot on either day.
- It did not pick-up traffic turning into TJ's parking lot.
- And it should be noted that March 14 was a school holiday for Lafayette elementary and middle schools, making it an atypical weekday.

An independent and more comprehensive traffic study is required. This intersection and its traffic patterns are complex and particularly hazardous – it is an off-centered four way intersection that already has significant car traffic into and out of the surrounding businesses and truck deliveries that service these facilities.

If developers are "scouring the length of Mt. Diablo Boulevard for opportunities" to build – then Lafayette should have some good leverage for collaborative discussions of what's good for the city and still satisfies developers' bottom lines.

Together with some of our neighbors in the Happy Valley Highlands Improvement Association, we look forward to this type of discussion with Lennar Homes in May. We hope to gain agreement on:

- Reducing number of units, to less than the original 47-unit proposal
- Reducing the units from 3 stories to 2 stories, and those staged as far from the streets as possible
- Agreeing that all entry and exit will be from Mt. Diablo Boulevard
- Eliminating any entry and exit on Dolores Drive
- Having the city conduct an independent, comprehensive traffic and safety study (funded by developers who are proposing projects)

Sincerely,

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