

CITY OF LA CAÑADA FLINTRIDGE

SPECIAL MEETING MINUTES

PLANNING COMMISSION
Thursday, August 4, 2011

CITY HALL COUNCIL CHAMBERS
1327 Foothill Boulevard
6:00 p.m.

- I. CALL TO ORDER:** 6:10 p.m.
- II. ROLL:** Present – Chair Curtis, Vice Chair Cahill, Commissioners Jain, Gunter;
Absent – Commissioner Der Sarkessian (Recused for distance – immediate neighbor)

Also in attendance: Roy Leisure (City’s Consulting Landscape Architect); Mark Steres (City Attorney); Robert Stanley (Community Development Director); Fred Buss (Senior Planner)
- III. PLEDGE OF ALLEGIANCE:** City Attorney Steres
- IV. COMMENTS FROM THE PUBLIC:** None
- V. REORDERING OF THE AGENDA:** None
- VI. CONSENT CALENDAR:** None
- VII. CONTINUED PUBLIC HEARING:** None
- VIII. PUBLIC HEARINGS:** None
- IX. OTHER BUSINESS**
 - A. Final Review - Landscape Plans for Merritt Property (HDP 06-55/SFR 07-10) on Windermere Place.** [Phil Merritt (Project Applicant); Arnold Graham (Applicant’s Attorney)]

Senior Planner Buss recaps that this is a continued hearing from July 26, 2011. The purpose of the special meeting is to finish review of the required landscape plan so that the applicant may proceed with the development of his project. The Commission wanted further information regarding the plan and wanted the two affected neighbors to meet with staff on the site and review the proposed plan in order to elicit final

comments or concerns. This resulted in some additional changes on the plan to address the Boysen/Madsen boundary line area. The Podocarpus was changed to Acacia salicina. The Acacia salicina attain a height of 40 feet and were suggested by the City's landscape architect as a replacement. They grow taller and faster than the Podocarpus. Additionally, the City's landscape architect suggested that the bark shown on the plans for the "cut-graded" areas be replaced with Myoporum parvifolium, a better rooting system for holding the hillside. Staff also noted that Windermere Place was changed from a public street to a private driveway. This relaxes a number of requirements for Windermere Place including grade, width, walls and cul-de-sac. Mr. Leisure provided a line-of-sight drawing and revised planting plan as part of the Commission packet.

Mr. Leisure addresses several issues regarding the Acacia salicina: availability of plants, growth rate of about 2-2.5 feet per year, and a low branching shrub. He recommends that the Acacia be substituted and that the Fire Department should sign off on the tree change.

Commissioner Gunter asks if this new tree will be accepted by the Fire Department. Mr. Leisure responds that he thinks the Fire Department got the name slightly wrong on the list and that this may be the tree they were thinking of. The issue may be that the species called out by the Fire Department may only come in one gallon size or may not be available at all. The recommended species should be more available in 24" box and therefore have a better head start to do the screening when planted.

Chairman Curtis asks Mr. Leisure about the 18" planting area at the boundary and if the Podocarpus just needs 18" or will more space allow for faster growth. Mr. Leisure responds that he is not in favor of the Podocarpus because they don't grow as fast and the neighbors will have to continuously hedge (cut) the plants to get the effect they want.

Director Stanley and City Attorney Steres point out the different plans that the Commission has and what is being referenced. He points out that the Commission has the original plan from the last meeting and three changes proposed by staff.

Mr. Leisure comments that when staff was at the site he noted that Mr. Madsen has planted several eucalyptus trees and five oak trees, one of which is 5" in diameter, between the pool and the Merritt property. He stated that between these trees and the ones that will be planted on the Merritt site, the house will truly disappear. Even if the trees go up or down a foot, it won't make much difference.

Chairman Curtis states that it was mentioned in the last hearing that some of the elevations have changed slightly by up to two to three feet. The response was that all the elevations have changed so that the landscaping will be higher when planted and the same type of mitigation would occur.

The City Attorney reminds the Commission that only the landscape plan is before them tonight and they are not acting on any of the elevations set forth in the plans. He also reminds the Commission that they are reviewing the gate location on the driveway. The Commission should also ask questions about the gate if they have any.

Commissioner Jain asks Mr. Leisure whether the root system will damage the retaining walls? Mr. Leisure responds that the Acacias will not have any effect on the wall. The various footings, gravel and the backfill material act like a giant root barrier so the plants will not harm the wall. Also the Acacias don't get that big in diameter so that there is not a concern for damage.

Commissioner Cahill asks Mr. Leisure what concerns the neighbor raised that he thought were not addressed. He looks at the letter and asks about the various points.

Mr. Leisure stated that he limited him to the landscaping as much as possible because that is what he was hired for. He noted that Mr. Madsen kept bringing up points about hardscape. His biggest concern was the view to the garage and the look of the wall. Mr. Leisure felt that those issues have been addressed with the planting that is being described tonight. At the time, he didn't know the Podocarpus would continue to be used along with the Acacias. In addition, during construction, it is possible to plant pockets of creeping fig or ivy that would grow over the top of a swale and that can grow also. Once we get plant material on the engineered filled slope between the property line wall and the edge of the driveway (wall), the appearance should be satisfactory.

Senior Planner Buss interjects that he was also concerned about the Acacia screening because everything that he could find indicated a maximum height of 25 feet. He did not think that 25 feet would be enough.

Commissioner Cahill asked if the Acacias would lose their leaves. Mr. Leisure responded that they were evergreens (no they would not).

Commissioner Cahill mentioned his concern about headlights when cars came down the driveway. City Attorney Steres interjects that the City Council mandated a wall system along the edge of the driveway. The walls will block the headlight beams and the walls will be covered with a ficus. Landscaping is not being relied on for light screening. The walls are shown on the approved plans and conditioned as part of the approval.

Commissioner Cahill also notes that there was an oak tree originally proposed near the driveway hammerhead. Mr. Leisure explains that the Fire Department vetoed that location as being too close to the house. The other reason is that the on-site waste treatment system is located there and would preclude the tree.

Senior Planner Buss explains that the Fire Department's Fuel Mod Guidelines are adopted by the City and are followed (as of January 1, 2011). Prior to that date, the City did not require that the Guidelines be followed. This project was submitted several years ago, and was initially designed without regard to those guidelines. Hence the changes in the landscape plan. The City adopted a map that shows what parts of the City are subject to the Guidelines. This project lies within the Guideline required area.

Chairman Curtis opens the public hearing and asks if anyone would like to speak. The applicant is also asked if he would like to speak. The applicant declines comment. No one else in the audience wants to speak, so the public hearing is closed.

Commissioner Cahill states that the process has now gone through what it needs to go through with review by the owner and the neighbors, and with review/evaluation from a third party landscape architect. He stated that the plan is now where it needs to be and is satisfied with the outcome.

Chairman Curtis asks if Commissioner Cahill has any comments about the gate. He responds that he has no comments on the gate.

Commissioner Jain states that he shares the same views as Commissioner Cahill. He notes that the plan follows the spirit of the City Council and he feels that Mr. Leisure has addressed all the issues of the City Council.

Commissioner Gunter also shares the views of Commissioner Cahill. Having the neighbors involved and having Mr. Leisure think through the tree selection as non-partisan reviewer is good and that the trees will do what they are intended to do – screen the house. They do what the Council has asked for. Having the Podocarpus at the lower level will screen the wall at the base. He states that he believes that having the gate down by Inverness drive is the right place for it. Having it well back by the house would be incompatible with the neighborhood. He supports the project now the way it is presented tonight.

Chairman Curtis states that the landscaping plans need to take into account the original plans that have been approved and how they have been modified by the Planning Commission and City Council. Second, the extensive hardscape and how that is worked into the environment. Then look at the elevations and see how the landscaping plan has been established, you have double redundancy. He talks about planting sooner rather than later to start the process and that the soil and water are properly balanced for growth. As long as there is proper stacking space for the cars down at Inverness, then he is supportive of the gate being down by Inverness. Cars should not be wandering up the driveway.

City Attorney Steres reminds the Commission that there is condition in the original approval that addresses the timing of the planting. The point is to get an early start on

the screening. He recommends that the Planning Commission approve the landscape plans that are dated June 2011 plus the addendum plans, plus the Podocarpus between the swale and the Boysen/Madsen property line, and with the addendum giving the option of the two Acacia species. He states that the Planning Commission should also direct that Dr. Merritt compile one final plan with all these changes to be signed off by staff. He comments that the addendum includes the ground cover change.

Commissioner Gunter questions whether it would be better to reference one plan and then describe the addendum elements in the event that there are other elements that the Commission is not approving there will not be any ambiguity. Attorney Steres indicates that is acceptable but that is also why he is suggesting a final compiled plan that is reviewed and approved by staff to be sure that only the approved parts of the plan are shown and are approved.

Chairman Curtis comments that the gate can be moved closer to Inverness as long as it meets code.

Commissioner Gunter moves and Commissioner Jain seconds a motion to approve the plans as previously stated. The motion carries on a 4-0 vote.

Director Stanley addresses the Planning Commission on the report of items he has approved. The Commission has received these items via email. In the future, only the items that the Planning Commission may call up will be listed. The current list contains item that cannot be called up by the Planning Commission. In the future, the items will also be listed on the agenda.

Chairman Curtis also requests staff to review for them the list of items that may be called up by the Planning Commission. Director Stanley indicates that he will put that on the next agenda for a discussion item.

Director Stanley also shows the 1450 Sugarloaf Drive project to the Planning Commission (projected plans on the screen) indicating some changes that he will approve under a finding of consistency. He asks if the Planning Commission has any comments. The response is negative. Chairman Curtis asks if this will be something that staff will continually doing in the future? Director Stanley says that should the need arise in the future, he will do it as a memo under the Consent Calendar.

Commissioner Jain heard the City Council say that the Planning Commission should lay things out in black & white and be clear rather than general when approving projects. *[This is in reference to the Peters project on Lyans Drive.]* Revised, corrected drawings should be brought back for the Planning Commission to see the change and approve the final drawings. This will prevent any misinterpretation of the approval and any issues of what was said.

Director Stanley comments on the degree of changes that can be approved without having to try to redraw every time. The City Council felt that the degree of change was great enough that new plans should have been made.

X. REPORT OF DIRECTOR'S REVIEWS: No further comments.

XI. COMMENTS FROM THE COMMISSIONERS

XII. COMMENTS FROM THE DIRECTOR

XIII. ADJOURNMENT: 7:05 p.m.