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Member, Larkspur Planning Commission

Comments on the revised Rose Garden development proposal dated October 25, 2007

“Make it feel like Larkspur”

Rose Garden should feel like a neighborhood of Larkspur, not an optimized development opportunity. The guiding principles of the CLASP are focused around identifying and requiring those elements that will make Rose Garden best fit into the rest of our community, not as an enclave, but as a welcome new neighborhood and community resource. Key aspects of the CLASP promoting this fit with Larkspur include: matching the lot size, density and pattern of our neighborhoods, providing a range of housing affordability and multiple housing options, respecting the natural attributes of the site and making significant connections to the rest of town.

My yardstick for measuring the success of any development proposal is—“does it feel like Larkspur”? The current development proposal falls short in several critical ways, and needs significant re-working in my estimation.

First some technicalities: the developer failed to submit a plan showing the layout for the 5 additional units if the City does not accept the developer's option to purchase more land to expand the community center site. This plan needs to be presented to indicate the situation of, and access to these additional units. Also, no indication of entry/exit points to the community site is shown, making it difficult to judge how circulation to and from it is accommodated in the proposed plan.

The following are the deficiencies as I see them.

1. Size/unit mix of affordable housing: the size and unit configuration (# of bedrooms, baths, etc.) should—but does not-- approximate the size/unit types of the overall development. For instance, no 3 bedroom affordables are proposed, yet overall this is the most common unit type. Anything short of this parity is a form of marginalization of the affordable members of the community and does not in my view fulfill the intent of the extraordinary benefit for the density bonus.
2. Geographic distribution of affordable housing: Affordable housing should be distributed around the site in a way that it becomes indistinguishable from market-rate housing, which I believe is the intent of the CLASP language. This is a desirable feature of our best neighborhoods through-out town: Holcomb Ave in Baltimore Park, apartments over the Blue Rock, second units invisible in hillside homes in Madrone Canyon. This development should match that precedent. Concentrating affordables in the cottage homes could lead to stigmatization or ghettoizing their inhabitants. Nesting some of the cottages in with the Single

Family Dwellings (SFD's) is necessary to achieve this aim and potentially desirable as a way to address concerns over lot size and block layout—see below. As originally proposed, I thought second units at the Single Family Dwellings was reasonable if they could be gathered at an access drive (cum alley) to give them their own independent access without going through the yards of their primary residences. To me this was analogous to the traditional pattern of putting the garage in back as a separate structure.

3. Street grid: the street is where the public and private realms meet. There are several significant problems with the present street layout that will inhibit this source of important community interaction: first, Rose Lane (around the senior housing) will likely be signed to limit access in a way that un-invites the broader community to pass through--this should not be allowed. Rose should be designed as a two-way street and in all other respects match Camellia and Orchid street layouts to create a sense of community invitation through-out the new neighborhood.

The cul-de-sac at the cottages should be discouraged. I hope that a plan that shows the additional 5 cottages (if the City does not accept the additional land purchase option) would hook the cottage drive south to intersect Orchid Drive.

4. Block Size: in comparing the length of the Orchid Drive block at the center of the site to other neighborhood streets on Google Earth, I observe that a similar length of Monte Vista Ave. is broken into three blocks. As proposed, this block is too long. The applicant should split the block in two with a mid-block walk or lane. If located properly, it could provide north-south access within Rose Garden to and from the community center and possibly be aligned with a reconfigured Cottage drive needed to accommodate the additional 5 cottage homes and provide access all the way through to Doherty. This lane could also be an opportunity for access to second units nestled among the SFD's.
5. Lot configuration: the traditional layout of Larkspur neighborhoods blends a variety of seeming incongruously large and small lot sizes resulting in several benefits including a pleasing and eclectic mix of large and small homes thereby avoiding a monolithic look to streets, and the ability to blend more affordable smaller homes in among larger ones. A significant additional benefit is the ability to wrap even the shortest of subdivision blocks with homes facing the street rather than a block long frontage of side and back yards.

As proposed, I observe that entering the neighborhood from Doherty, I am deep within the development before I reach the first house's front door facing Camellia: 500' from the east intersection of Doherty and Camellia and 700' feet

from the west. This is equivalent to travelling two and a half blocks along Monte Vista. Imagine the delightful porches and front yards there, versus side-yard fences along Camellia. This is unacceptable. Possible solutions could include: inserting smaller cottage home lots along the short-ends of blocks, re-orienting homes and creating distinct corner unit types with two fronts (see the newer home at the bend in Ward Street adjacent to the Niven site) and possibly re-considering the limit to the minimum lot size for SFD's imposed by the CLASP in order to create smaller in-fill lots.

6. Arrangement of senior housing: as proposed the senior housing is totally inward focused with a "moat" made of garages and service drive surrounding it. Not a single front door faces any part of the Rose Garden Community at-large. This is an "anti-neighborhood-connected" approach where residences literally turn their backs on their neighbors and the larger community, and should not be allowed. I believe cars are the primary culprit which can be overcome. The Campus Properties plan for Larkspur Landing is commendable in the way that garages are unobtrusive--screened from view in car-courts, below-grade parking or housing over parking podium configurations--all of which are preferable to this proposal in the way they visually and physically "erase" the car, driveway and garage as a source of interference between housing, the street and the community. The developer should be required to resolve car access and garages in a similarly unobtrusive way as Campus's project at Larkspur Landing.

The garden proposed as part of the senior housing should be re-oriented on the site to become a community garden to the benefit of all Rose Garden residents in a way that encourages interaction among the generations living there, rather than isolation from them.

7. Connections to downtown: In my estimation this is the most significant failure of the proposed plan, missing critical connections to the rest of town to the west—shopping, dining, civic and transit connections are diminished as a result. The CLASP stressed the importance of an east-west view corridor through the site with a terminus focused on the rail depot and theater marquee beyond. As proposed, this access is marginalized: Orchid Drive narrows into "private drive aisle, one way" for senior housing (Rose Lane) with likely signage limiting vehicular access, and is no more inviting than an access-way to garages with a 2.5' landscape buffer at the blank back wall of Lucky's. This axis peters out altogether at its west end when it reaches the edge of the site at the railroad grade/bike path. This needs to be re-thought as a continuous street environment (Rose and Orchid together) that terminates in something meaningful at the edge of the site: a pocket-park, small plaza, even as simple as a wide-spot in a

pedestrian path with benches and ornamental planting. A much more significant landscape buffer between the back of Lucky's and the streetscape is needed.

The approach to the project from Ward Street, while not a point of vehicular access to Rose Garden, is still an important pedestrian and visual connection. As developed it is unappealing. While houses oriented toward Ward may be desirable, seeing carports for senior housing is not. Again like the north side of the senior housing service drive being more like Orchid Drive, this southern part of the drive should look and feel more like a visual extension of Camellia Circle, than a service drive and dog-leg driveway running in parallel. Again, this important axis should terminate in a pocket-park, small plaza or a simple as a wide-spot in a pedestrian path with benches and ornamental planting. Also, it is not clear how planting will be treated. This corner of the site is the visual point of connection to the creek as it enters the site and should be planted in a way that establishes that natural open-space character at this corner of the site.

8. A minor point—but details matter: No significant permanent development signs should be permitted at entries to the neighborhood as this is not an historical feature of our town. A small, visually unobtrusive entry feature could be appropriate in my view.