



Photo by Paul Wellman

More Review for Gaviota Mega-House

The Slow Grind of Process

By Ethan Stewart

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Tentative plans to put a luxury home longer than a football field on top of a ridge at the southern gateway to the Gaviota Coast came to a grinding — though perhaps temporary — halt this week. For nearly three hours on Tuesday, June 19, Santa Barbara County supervisors struggled to make sense of an occasionally heated three-way version of “he said / she said” among their own staff, the advocates of the 13,333-square-foot Ballantyne home, and those opposed to the construction of the massive single-family home. In the end, the board voted 3-2 in favor of its own staff’s recommendation to subject the proposal to environmental review, despite the same project’s 3-2 approval by the Planning Commission just eight months ago. Clearly frustrated by the proceedings, 4th District Supervisor Joni Gray commented before voting, “This is probably the worst mess I have ever seen in the County of Santa Barbara.”

The writing has been on the wall for the Ballantyne “mess” for some time now. The project was initially denied by the Planning and Development Department three years ago because staff felt the house, twice the size of the average single family home in the area, would create too much of an eyesore on Gaviota’s virgin skyline for it to be approved. This decision was backed up by the county’s Board of Architectural Review, which recommended relocation and redesign to make the Barry Berkus-designed home comply with the county code. Understandably upset with the fate of their retirement home, Texas native Randy Welty (pictured above left, with his spokesman Richard Adam) and his wife, Lynn Ballantyne, appealed the preliminary judgment to the Planning Commission last fall and gained a hard-fought 3-2 approval in November 2006 after promising to relocate the project 20 feet back on their 17-acre property and to reduce the size of a controversial 600-foot-long earthen berm designed to conceal the house from the public viewshed of Highway 101 and nearby Rancho Embarcadero.

Citing many of the same issues that motivated county staffers to reject the project, the Gaviota Coastal Conservancy appealed the Planning Commission’s decision, leading to this week’s hearing before the supervisors. Adding a nuanced twist to its appeal, the GCC argued that since the Planning Commission approved the project based upon tweaks to the original plan, the Ballantyne

debate had become a discretionary decision and as such should be subjected to a California Environmental Quality Act-mandated review, which most family home proposals are exempted from.

Explaining the motivation for the group's appeal, GCC attorney Marc Chytilo told the supervisors, "General Plan inconsistencies cannot be overridden. They are a showstopper. As is, this project cannot legally proceed." Further fortifying the GCC's stance was a belief that the proposed house could be moved north to place it entirely below the existing ridge line while preserving the house's views.

Arguing against the appeal, Ballantyne spokesperson Richard Adam claimed the Berkus creation—with its green waste recycling facility, grey-water system, and solar power—was "the epitome of what is desired in Santa Barbara County." Adam was additionally indignant at the prospect of the project becoming a discretionary decision requiring CEQA review because, in his opinion, the changes that greased the wheels of the Planning Commission approval had come from the applicant, not the imposed conditions of the commissioners themselves. Thus, because the modifications to the proposed plans were not a result of commissioner requests, Adam said he felt the commission's role should have remained ministerial this go-round. Adam even played a DVD of the November hearing in which the mitigating ideas did in fact appear to come from the applicants.

In the end, the supervisors were less than convinced. Both Janet Wolf and Salud Carbajal lobbied for outright denial of the project while Gray, Brooks Firestone, and a reluctant Joe Centeno all chose to send the Ballantyne plan back for environmental review before making up their minds. To that end, it is expected to be at least four months before the reevaluated proposal returns.