

Saranap Village development gets unanimous approval from Contra Costa supervisors



Courtesy Hall Equities Group

An artist's conception of one segment of the Saranap Village project approved Tuesday by the Contra Costa Board of Supervisors. This view includes the proposed traffic roundabout at the intersection of Boulevard Way and Saranap Avenue.

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MARTINEZ — Saying the project will provide needed housing and almost single-handedly rejuvenate a threadbare commercial corridor, Contra Costa County supervisors on Tuesday unanimously approved the \$100 million Saranap Village commercial/retail mixed use project that figures to transform a tired commercial strip between Walnut Creek and Lafayette.

The supervisors approved zoning and planning changes needed for the project, which would have up to 198 housing units (122 apartments, 76 condos), approximately 21,522 square feet of commercial space (including a small grocery store) and 492 parking spaces, on the street and in three parking structures. The project will include parcels on both sides of Boulevard Way, this village's main thoroughfare.



BAY AREA NEWS GROUP “These are exactly the kinds of projects we need in the Bay Area to meet housing demand and to beautify tired areas,” said Supervisor John Gioia of Richmond, adding that the project is a blueprint for the kind of infill development the county needs. “This is a showcase kind of project.”

Gioia, Candace Andersen of Danville and other supervisors praised not only the project, but the process.

Walnut Creek-based developer Mark Hall and his Hall Equities Group have been working on Saranap Village for more than four years, in part because there have been two remakes for one part of the project, and one redrawing of a second part.

Andersen praised two community groups for heavy involvement over the past few years — including their criticism — that resulted in major changes in size and height.

“The project would not be what it is today without those concerns raised,” Andersen said.

Contra Costa Supervisors Candace Andersen (left) and John Gioia listen Tuesday, Aug. 15 to a presentation about the Saranap Village mixed-use project proposed for unincorporated Walnut Creek. The project was approved by the supervisors on a 5-0 vote. Sam Richards/Staff

When first proposed, the project called for 235 condos and apartments, and 30,000 square feet of retail, including a larger grocery store, and a gym covering the three main parcels. Since 2014, the largest portion of the project has been reworked twice, to make it somewhat smaller and shorter.

Some concerns lingered Tuesday. Saranap resident David Kincaid said the size and height — from 55 to 71 feet, depending on where it would be measured from — would still overwhelm this semi-rural community.

“It’s just too much development for this area; it would have been more appropriate for a BART transit village,” Kincaid said.

But the supervisors’ meeting chamber was filled with people wearing “Saranap Village-Yes!” adhesive badges, and while some told the supervisors they had supported the project from Day One, others said the size and height reductions made them believers.

Of 35 people who addressed supervisors, 32 praised the project, mostly for how it would transform Saranap’s dreary Boulevard Way business strip.

“Change is inevitable; it all depends on how you do it,” said resident Charles Huddleston, who supported the “yes” vote.

As part of the approval process, Hall Equities agreed to give \$50,000 as seed money for developing a plan for Saranap’s future development, which doesn’t now exist.

In addition to the housing and the retail space, the project would include some changes to Boulevard Way and to Saranap Avenue, including narrowing a portion of Boulevard Way from four lanes to two; installing diagonal parking there and on Saranap Avenue; and creating a roundabout at the intersection of the two streets.

After the vote, which drew loud cheers and applause, Hall said he hopes to begin grading work by mid-2018, or Spring 2019 if county plan checks take longer than expected and/or the weather doesn’t cooperate.

If Hall’s planning team was relieved after the vote, so too was Saranap resident Ryan Buckley, who was blunt about his interest in the project.

“I like the project because it might help to protect my million-dollar investment” in my home, Buckley said.