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Planners to advise veto on mansion near Gaviota coast

MELINDA BURNS, NEWS-PRESS SENIOR WRITER

October 3, 2006 7:12 AM

County staff planners are recommending a "no" vote this week on a proposed 13,300-square-foot home on a ridgetop on Farren Road at the gateway to the Gaviota coast, saying it would mar public views.

According to a report for the county Planning Commission, which will consider the proposal on Wednesday, the house would be as long as a football field and would intrude into the skyline. It would be highly visible from Highway 101, Farren Road and Calle Real, the report says, and its concrete walls, metal roofing and large glass windows would be incompatible with the nearby pasturelands and avocado orchards.

"It would appear as a long, linear mass on the horizon," the report says. "The residence employs a contemporary design that would result in a prominent commercial/institutional-appearing structure."

The house on Farren Road is proposed for a 17-acre property owned by Lynn Ballantyne of Goleta. In addition to the main house, Ms. Ballantyne wants to build a guest house and garage and barn, for an additional 2,600 square feet.

In recent letters to the county, Ms. Ballantyne's attorney, Peter Brown, notes that Rancho Embarcadero, an urban subdivision in Tecolote Canyon, is just as much part of the "natural" surroundings as the grazing lands. The Ballantyne house, he said, would be single-story, low-lying and built on a curved line to minimize the impact on public views. It would be made of materials that weather and blend in with the environment and it would employ solar electricity. In short, Mr. Brown said, it would be a model of "green technology," more efficient than a traditional farmhouse.

"The house does not make any kind of 'statement' that could detract from the hills and rolling areas to the west," he wrote. "Its design is subdued."

The county Planning and Development staff and the South County Board of Architectural Review rejected Ms. Ballantyne's plans in June, based on county policies that prohibit ridgetop development and require new homes to "fit in" with their natural surroundings.

"This is something that we pointed out to them very early in the process," Allen Bell, a county staff planner, said Monday. "A month into this, we gave them the lowdown on what our take was, and things haven't changed significantly since then."

Ms. Ballantyne is appealing to the commission to reverse the staff's decision. Meanwhile, a number of Rancho Embarcadero residents say they will attend the hearing to urge a "no" vote. They want Ms. Ballantyne to follow the advice of the planning staff and move the house 200 feet north, to the other side of the ridge, where it would not be visible from the coast.

"I'm not saying they shouldn't build," Joan Bolton, a resident of Rancho Embarcadero, said Monday. "But I'd like them to follow the rules. They have 17 acres. You'd think they could find a spot to build that didn't cause such a ruckus, but they seem unwilling to budge."

To screen her house, Ms. Ballantyne initially proposed to plant a new orchard of 160 citrus trees, a feature that some members of the architectural board rejected as a "faux orchard." The board said the trees would draw attention to the buildings rather than screen them.

Mr. Brown argued that houses were often located within orchards in rural areas of the county. And he objected to the board's characterization of the project as part of the Gaviota coast, an area that preservationists are trying to save from urbanization.

"It's a Goleta property," Mr. Brown said Monday. "It's right next door to Rancho Embarcadero. It's not on the Gaviota coast; it's governed by Goleta planning policies."

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In place of an orchard, Mr. Brown said, Ms. Ballantyne is now proposing to cut into the ridgetop to lower the house and, at the same time, construct a dirt embankment in front of it to hide it from public view. The proposed embankment would be 300 feet long and up to 10 feet high. But county staff planners have rejected this plan as well, saying it would create an artificial skyline.

Contrary to county policy, the staff report says, "the applicant has proposed modifying the natural landforms rather than shifting the location of the residence so as not to intrude into the skyline."

Mr. Brown said that if Ms. Ballantyne moved the house 200 feet north, she would lose her view of the coast.

"It means dropping it down into the back part of the property," he said.

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Tree trimmers take a break from their work Monday morning near the Farren Road property where a proposed 13,300-square-foot home would be built. STEVE MALONE/NEWS-PRESS



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