



Photo by Paul Wellman

Dirt Wall and All, Supes Approve Mega-Home

Mansion at the Gate

By Ethan Stewart

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For five years, Randy Welty and his wife, Lynn Ballantyne, have been trying to build their retirement home—a 13,333-square-foot glass and metal monster of a house complete with nearly 2,500 additional square feet of barns and guest houses—just off Farren Road at the easternmost gate of the Gaviota Coast. This week, with a narrow vote of support from Santa Barbara County supervisors, it appears their controversial plan will become a reality.

Nearly twice the size of the average home in the area and proposed for a ridgeline clearly visible from both Highway 101 and the neighboring Rancho Embarcadero neighborhood, the Ballantyne residence, as it is known, was approved 3-2 on Tuesday afternoon, July 15 (South Coast Supervisors Salud Carbajal and Janet Wolf voting against) despite a checkered track record with the county process that includes a denial of application from both the Board of Architectural Review and the County's Planning and Development Department, as well as a thumbs-up from the Planning Commission.

In the end, hanging their hats on a potentially precedent-setting design feature that calls for a dirt wall 600 feet long and 200 yards wide to be constructed around the home in hopes of hiding its girth from the outside world, the supes, specifically the North County majority of Brooks Firestone, Joni Grey, and Joe Centeno, chose to ignore potential conflicts with county land use policy and approve the project—dirt wall and all.

Tuesday afternoon's showdown came more than a year after county supervisors—responding to the Gaviota Coastal Conservancy's appeal of the Planning Commission's aforementioned

approval of the Ballantyne project—decided that before they could rule on that appeal the house needed some environmental review. Stopping short of asking for an actual Environmental Impact Report, something that is seldom needed for single-family homes, the supes simply called upon Rincon Consultants to look at the various issues associated with the project.

“the building really would not be visible in any meaningful way from Highway 101.” — Joe Power

Rincon’s Joe Power presented a 65-page document to supervisors this week, painting an environmentally favorable portrait of the proposed mega-house, calling it “generally compatible with the character of the area” and, most importantly, saying that with the dirt berm in place, “the building really would not be visible in any meaningful way from Highway 101.” According to Power, the only major—and easily mitigated—impacts would be noise during construction and fire protection because the property is right in the heart of forest-fire country. Additionally, though he admitted it was a “debatable point,” Power explained that the report discounted the house’s obvious viewshed impacts on neighbors and people using Farren Road because these vantage points were considered less than thoroughfares.



Paul Wellman

Marc Chytilo

To the Gaviota Coast Conservancy, fighting for what its lawyer Marc Chytilo called “the integrity of Gaviota and the integrity of the county land use process,” not only was the Rincon Consultants document woefully inadequate, and not only was the proposal begging for a full-blown EIR investigation because of unaddressed and unresolved water supply and water quality issues, but, in approving the house with its unprecedented dirt-wall solution, the supervisors were grossly compromising County General Plan policy. Pointing to specific language in county land use code that says, “Structures shall be subordinate in appearance to natural landforms, shall be designed to follow the natural contours of the landscape, and shall be sited so as not to intrude into the skyline as seen from public viewing places,” Chytilo argued unsuccessfully that using a manmade dirt wall to conceal the obvious ridgeline-muddling of the Ballantyne residence is not a legitimate interpretation of the policy. “Simply putting a berm in front of a structure that intrudes into the skyline [doesn’t fix the problem],” said Chytilo, “It gives you two structures that intrude into the skyline.”

“It just flies in the face of good planning when we don’t follow our own policies,” Wolf argued.

Chytilo’s reasoning did not move the board’s majority, nor did Carbajal and Wolf’s attempts to sway their fellow supervisors. “It just flies in the face of good planning when we don’t follow our own policies,” Wolf argued. For the other supes, the berm, plus Ballantyne and Welty’s earlier concession to move their house site back 20 feet deeper into their 17-acre property, as well as their plan to use cutting-edge green technologies in the crafting of their dream home, were enough to finally grease the wheels of approval, leaving critics with no chance for appeal save for a legal challenge of the decision.