

Valley Center Design Review Board

Proposed Minutes: January 6, 2014

DRB Members Present: Montgomery, Moore, Splane, Herr
Presenter: Steve Wragg, NLP, Chris Brown, for Photovoltaic Solar Farm
Jerry Gaughan, Erik Fox for Hatfield Center

Visitors: Christine Lewis, Candy Butler, Cathy Cowan, Susan Barber, Glen Barber, Gina Leon for Valley Center Solar. Bill Miller and Michael Crane for both projects

There were no speakers for Open Forum

PROJECTS:

1. PDS 2013-MUP-13-019 (Major Use Permit).

Photovoltaic Solar Farm. 29471 Cole Grade Road (at the corner of Valencia). Approximate 80-acre property, currently owned by the Armstrong family, and optioned to the applicant.

Chris Brown opened the discussion stating that the client was reviewing comments from the VCC Planning Group, and neighbor concerns, and the project scoping letter from the County. They are visiting the Design Review Board to hear our recommendations. The project is a solar farm proposed for an 80-acre property, with a General Plan designation that allows Semi-Rural Residential development. The property has been planted for many years in citrus. Much of the orchard has already been removed. The parcel now has an existing orange grove, part will remain, part will be removed. A natural creek runs diagonally across the property and provides wildlife habitat..

The solar farm would be there for 25 years. It is an unmanned facility. The maintenance to the panels is they get washed off each quarter. Panels are made from recycled material, and there is money in the project for removal and recycling of materials.

The Design Review Board is particularly concerned with fencing/screening and landscaping of what is essentially an industrial use in a Semi-Rural Residential neighborhood. There are a number of applications for these facilities in San Diego County. The DRB mentioned to Chris Brown and Steve Wragg that the Sol-Orchard installation (also clients of theirs), between Vesper and Valley Center Road, approved about a year ago, had been screened with bougainvillea in a frost zone. Montgomery showed photographs, taken this morning, of mainly-dead bougainvillea along Vesper Road, and said that the landscaping we thought would be sufficient is obviously a disappointment. She said she had sent to photographs to the County planner making the same comment. Susan Moore reiterated that Valley Center's micro-climates have many frost zones. Landscapers need to educate themselves, and to plant, not monocultures (bougainvillea alone IS a monoculture) but several varieties, in this case, several varieties of hardy vines. Lesson learned, we hope. Sol-Orchard will have to replace the dead vines, Chris Brown said.

Our first review of this project was very general. Chris Brown explained that the site plan shows no landscaping because the applicant wants to hear what the community would like before making a proposal. Therefore, on this site plan, rows of solar panels pretty much cover the entire area of the property that is available for the installation. The natural drainage across the property, of course, cannot be covered in solar generating equipment. Solar arrays are planned along the east side of Cole Grade Road, and for both the south and north sides of Valencia Road.

Several neighbors to the project were present, and their concerns were screening along Cole Grade and Valencia roads, and screening of their views from their homes of the solar arrays. Residences are accessed on Via Valencia and sit above the solar installation to the north. Chris Brown offered to visit their homes and properties, discuss particular view problems with each of them, and design a landscape plan that addresses them; he said trees, shrubs and other kinds of screening materials might be installed on NLP's property or the neighbor's property.

The group discussed a number of screening issues, and a number of different possible solutions. The idea generally is to provide enough green softening to these sorts of installations so that surrounding residents can support them, rather than object to them. Areas of particular concern about this proposed installation, and possible remedies include:

1. Allowing enough area outside fencing (setback from the fencing) for planting trees, shrubs and vines that will truly screen the installation from view.
2. Cole Grade Road: Dense screening needs to be installed outside the project fence to screen the project from Cole Grade Road.
Via Valencia is the entrance to a residential neighborhood. It is also the access from Cole Grade to entrances of both north and south sections of the solar facility. This entire area needs to be heavily landscaped so that it looks like the entrance to a residential neighborhood, rather than the entrance to an industrial facility. Treatment of both sides of Via Valencia should enhance the entrance to this residential neighborhood. Too, this is a Semi-Rural area. Landscaping needs to have a natural look and be dense enough to completely camouflage the solar installation.
3. Neighbors suggested that a landscaped trail along Via Valencia might help take the sting off. The facility entrances need to be camouflaged, as well, with attractive gates, landscaping along the fencing, and, (do we really have to say this?) NO RAZOR WIRE. Nice iron or wooden gates with pilasters, combined with trees and shrubs, would be a welcome detail to the project.
4. Slats in chain link fencing were discussed would be acceptable for additional screening. Overall the neighbors stated the slated fencing looked more industrial than natural and would be unacceptable as the only screening, or as permanent screening. However, slats of a natural color that blended into the landscape, perhaps redwood or green, might be a good idea for temporary screening while plant material is maturing.
5. Rob Splane suggested that the interior roads could run north-south, rather than east-west as shown on the site plan. This would allow for undulating setbacks necessary to create a natural edge for planting along Valencia.
6. The drainage should not be fenced. Fencing will destroy its habitat value. Leave the drainage open for wildlife.

7. The property could be fenced creatively to create irregular shapes, rather than typically industrialized rectangles, lines and hard edges. For example:
 - a. Some of the existing “pods” of citrus could remain, or, if water is a concern, could be planted with olive trees, or another drought resistant species.
 - b. The solar “pods” could be fenced separately and in more irregular shapes.
 - c. Each of the solar ‘pods’ could be fenced separately.
 - d. The natural creek could be left open, and the existing oaks and other natural vegetation left in tact.
 - e. The overall effect, particularly the views from above would be less “industrial”, more irregular and natural, both in shape and color.
8. Interior roads should be as narrow as possible. The DRB’s other concern is of the natural creek bed.
9. True “screening” requires a minimum of 3 ‘layers’ of dense landscaping. Trees, large shrubs, then medium shrubs. Vines are acceptable on the fence. But, vines alone DO NOT adequately screen this type of facility. Screening that thrives also requires a variety of plant material -- as monocultures are prone to disease, and/or fatal accidents of nature.

2. Hatfield Place Project:

Tentative Map and Site Plan Revision (TM 2013-21202 and STP 2013-011). Valley Center Road (at Woods Valley) in the South Village.

Jerry Gaughan presented revised renderings for the Hatfield Place Project, along with some drawings. At the south end of the property, the wall has been revised to 3, 6-8’ high walls. Instead of using a structural soil material at the ‘base’ of the wall, Jerry said they will be using a 10’ strip of concrete pavers set in sand. This will assist any future plantings to grow to a more full mature state to screen the wall. The wall material will be made of a ‘field stone’. (Actual type not determined at this time.) There is an area of the wall that remains 22’ in height. The building that sits in front of that piece requires a pitched roof in order to screen the wall.

The applicant has worked hard to make the site plan acceptable to the Design Review Board. The site design has been much improved since the first presentation to the DRB. However, the project design still requires excessive grading of the site’s natural steep topography and retaining walls that exceed the community’s height limit for walls -- by eighteen feet!

The applicant was disappointed to understand in this meeting that the DRB has not yet, as he had imagined, approved the architectural plan for each of the five buildings being proposed for this project. Nor has the landscaping plan been reviewed. Meetings throughout the fall have been completely focused on site plan difficulties.

The DRB, therefore, has not yet reviewed architectural elevations for the project. Montgomery said that the applicant was mistaken in his presumption that the architecture had been “approved” when the Board said that “the site plan is the problem”. True, the DRB chair had said that she was confident that the architectural guidelines were the least of our worries. This did not mean that they HAD BEEN met. (Note from the chair, to clarify this situation: Although the original

drawings presented by the former architect were, we said, “headed in the right direction,” we also said that the site plan was completely unacceptable, and that we would focus on the site plan first. This original architect is no longer working on the project.

The DRB told the applicant that it is not possible to review the architecture style and detail proposed for each building from renderings the applicant has submitted. The Board has several times asked the applicant to stop showing CAD renderings, and instead to show standard construction site plans, elevations and cross sections. The perspective on the renderings is skewed, and inaccurately portrays elements of the plan.

The Board has not focused on a review of architectural approaches in prior meetings, nor did we in this meeting. We cannot see the detail we need to see from the perspectives in the illustrations that the applicant has been presenting. We did, however, say that the (white) building was especially off the mark. The DRB reiterated that each building needs to represent a particular classic architectural genre; they are all listed and described in detail in the VC Design Review Checklist, and in the Guidelines. Buildings should vary in form and style somewhat; they should not all be the same. The detailing, trim, facades, rooflines and overhangs should all be authentic to the particular style selected for each building. “Hybrid” design – a little from this genre, a little from that in the same structure – is to be avoided. The library is full of books on classic California architectural styles, which, again, are listed in VC’s Design Guidelines.

The DRB also told the applicant that a review of the landscape plan will require a landscape plan and cross sections. Again, the rendering is inadequate.

Jerry requested a date change in the February meeting, as they would be out of town. Lael said she would research and get back to everyone. December Minutes were approved, and the meeting was adjourned at 7:00 pm.