

Valley Center Design Review Board

Approved Minutes: June 12, 2012

(With comments about the Accretive project proposal)

DRB Members present: Montgomery, Moore, Splane, Herr

Visitors: Chris Brown, Dennis Otsuji, Lilac Hills Ranch

4:00 PM Lael Montgomery opened the meeting.
There were no speakers for Public Forum.

Scheduled Projects:

- 1. Accretive GPA/SPA 12-001; Master TM & Grading Plan and Implementing TM & Grading Plan.
Current project name: Lilac Hills Ranch**

Lael opened the meeting by laying out plans for our review. She explained that the Master Tentative Map assembles the 60 existing parcels into a master plan of 16 lots with 1 remainder parcel. Chris Brown explained that a master plan approach to the tentative map allows the developer flexibility in the design of each lot because the established density on each large “lot” is planned and developed separately according to the overall Specific Plan. This approach also allows the master plan developer to sell “lots” to separate builders who would then submit their own tentative map for the development of that lot. Each phase has conditions to be met, and future phases are not allowed to be built until the previous phase has met all conditions. The total number of units set is 1746. Chris says there are no density bonuses, and that, under the terms of their Plan Amendment Authorization, regardless of whether the applicant accumulates more property, no more than 1746 units can be built.

The discussion began with grading, which, DRB members said, looked to be very extensive: they will move 4.4 Million cubic yards. Chris assured the DRB that this is ‘contour’ grading, not flat plateau grading. He cited San Elijo Hills as the model for this development. There is one central town center and two additional “neighborhood retail” nodes. Chris Brown asserted that the project is “walkable”, meaning that automobiles are unnecessary for internal transportation. The DRB chair remarked that this property is a cross-shape that extends two miles N-S, and two miles E-W; her understanding is that a distance of ½ mile is considered the industry standard for “walkable”.

Chris says that San Elijo has won many planning awards. Lael asked for a list of these as she has always understood that the project’s has received marketing awards, not planning awards. Chris Brown said he would send the award list to Lael via e-mail. DRB members stated that San Elijo’s design, in any case, is not in sync with Valley Center’s Design Guidelines.

Dennis Otsuji of Wimmer, Yamada and Caughey attended the meeting in order to review the preliminary landscape plan. He has been a part of major developments in San Diego County since the 1970’s. The DRB felt it was premature to review landscape plans and discuss plant material before we understood what all the pieces of the overall development are and how they fit together. We have not received enough information about the larger plan to discuss landscaping details. We appreciated his attendance and look forward to a future presentation of the plans.

The DRB discussed that the applicant has filed this GPA/SPA much earlier in the project-development process than developers who have co-developed their plans through community meetings before filing a GPA or an SPA. Therefore, we are accustomed at the point of application to having much greater familiarity with a project, and to the provision in the application documents of considerably more detail.

Neither the DRB nor the Planning Group has worked with this applicant in the way we have worked with the developers of the North and South Village, for example, where the land uses proposed have been in accord with the community plan. In sharp contrast to the central valley village areas -- which have evolved over the last 150 years as the business "crossroads" of Valley Center, been part of the overall community plan since the 1960s, and have been elaborately detailed by the community and the developers during the recent General Plan Update -- this project defies Valley Center's vision for itself.

Accretive has filed a General Plan Amendment which, if approved, would upzone this property by about 2000% to allow 1746 dwellings and three commercial areas. The Regional Category would change to Village from its recently-approved GP Regional Category of Semi-Rural which allows approximately 350 homes on 2, 4 and 10 dwellings per acre.

Lael raised the issue that Valley Center residents, property owners and developers have worked many hours to create the VC Community Plan which this development proposal would overturn. The VC Community Plan, approved less than a year ago, is a two-part growth strategy that concentrates 25% of the future growth as compact "infill" development of two existing Village "nodes" in the central valley along Valley Center Rd. The second part of the community's planning strategy is to feather residential density from its densest in the traditional village core to Semi-Rural and Rural designations in remote, hilly, fire-prone areas to the east, north and west. In these "green-field" areas, which, according to principles of the new General Plan, also "buffer" the community from adjacent communities, the VC land use plan retains larger parcels for agriculture, horticulture and animal husbandry that have historically characterized Valley Center.

The applicant has submitted maps and documents that lack sufficient detail for the group to understand any detail about the development plan for this property. Further, there has been no presentation of the project by the applicant; the most basic facts of the development plan remain murky.

We received a copy of the Specific Plan Text on Tuesday 6/5/12. Chris Brown encouraged the group to take more time with our review and comments on the text; he is requesting an additional 30-45 days from the County. Lael said that this draft of the Specific Plan Text, through abundantly flowery, provided little more substantive detail than the maps and other documents; and that considerably more detail about the overall development plan would be necessary for us to comment further than we each had prepared to comment today.

The group discussed a number of different aspects of the proposal, and decided in our written comments to cite particular pages of the Design Guidelines. DRB members believe that this project fails in basic and essential ways to respect Valley Center's most fundamental design principles. Our comments at this time are focused in these areas which are pre-requisite for any development proposal to meet the community's community character objectives. We understand from the County planner, Mark Slovick, and from the developer's consultant, Chris Brown, that there will be revised iterations of the project and that our more detailed comments will have to wait for these details of the project to emerge from the process.

Comments submitted to DPLU are below:

Valley Center Design Review Board

June 14, 2012

TO: Mark Slovick, Rich Grunow, Jarrett Ramaiya, Jeff Murphy
San Diego Department of Planning and Development
RE: **Accretive Investment Group GPA 12-001, SP 12-001, Master Tentative Map 5571, Implementing Tentative Map 5572 and respective Grading Plans**

1. Insufficient Detail

The applicant has submitted maps and documents that lack sufficient detail for the group to understand any the development plan for this property. Further, there has been no presentation of the project by the applicant; as a result the most basic facts of the development plan remain murky.

The applicant has filed this GPA/SPA much earlier in the project-development process than developers who have co-developed their plans through community meetings before filing a GPA or an SPA. Therefore, we are accustomed at the point of application to having much greater familiarity with a project, and to the provision in the application documents of considerably more detail.

Neither the DRB nor the Planning Group has worked with this applicant in the way we have worked with the developers of the North and South Village where the land uses proposed have been in accord with the community plan, which is not the case with this project. We received a copy of the Specific Plan Text on Tuesday 6/5/12. Chris Brown encouraged the group to take more time with our review and comments on the text. (He said he is requesting an additional 30-45 days from the County.) However, from a cursory reading, the SP Text fails to provide sufficient additional substantive information to warrant any delay.

Considerably more detail about the overall development plan is necessary. We understand from the County planner, Mark Slovick, and from the developer's consultant, Chris Brown, that there will be revised iterations of the project. More detailed comments will come in response to more detailed plans.

2. Focus of Comments.

Our comments at this time are focused in areas which are pre-requisite for any development proposal to meet Valley Center's community character objectives.

3. Project Undermines the Vision for VC.

DRB members believe that this project fails in basic and essential ways to respect Valley Center's rural character and its most fundamental design principles. If approved, this General Plan Amendment would upzone this property by about 2000% to allow 1746 dwellings and three commercial areas. The Regional Category would change to Village from its recently-approved GP Regional Category of Semi-Rural which allows approximately 350 homes on 2, 4 and 10 dwellings per acre.

The imposition of an artificial "village" in Valley Center's rural countryside dismantles the community's recently-approved Community plan. County planners along with Valley Center residents, property owners

and developers have invested hundreds of hours, and extensive public and private resources to create the VC Community Plan, and to plan the private Village development to support it. This work was approved by the Board less than a year ago. VC's plan is a two-part growth strategy: first, 25% of the future growth is compact "infill" development of two existing Village "nodes" in the central valley along Valley Center Rd; second, residential density feathers from the village core to Semi-Rural and Rural designations in remote, hilly, fire-prone areas to the east, north and west. These "green-field" areas, in accord with principles of the new General Plan, also "buffer" the community from adjacent communities. This is a classic "Smart Growth" plan, it concentrates intense development in the Village area which has evolved over the last 150 years as the business "crossroads" of Valley Center, as has been the formal intention since the first community plan of the 1960s, and it retains existing larger parcels for agriculture, horticulture and animal husbandry that have historically characterized Valley Center.

This faux Village both undermines the plan to attract new businesses and residential vibrancy to existing genuine Village areas AND destroys greenfields, as well.

The following comments refer directly to particular VC Design Guidelines. We have not re-typed the Guidelines here. Please refer to the pages that are cited below.

4. P 3. The Purpose of Design Review

Comment: The proposed project fails to consider the community context in which it takes place, and fails to make an effort to develop a compatible relationship to the natural setting, neighboring properties and community design goals.

5. P4/10 Community Design Objectives

Comment: The proposal ignores the most fundamental of Valley Center's Design Objectives, which is to PRESERVE NATURAL FEATURES and OPEN SPACES. For starters, the project will move 4.4 MILLION cubic yards of dirt on 608 acres. Do the math. There are 3,291,200 square yards in 608 acres. This means *the project will move more 1 ¼ cubic yard of dirt for every square yard of the property.* Natural land forms, vegetation and wildlife will all be obliterated.

This development plan completely disregards Valley Center's "strong requirements for the protection of existing natural features (that are) provided in the Design Guidelines for new development" (among them) 'special measures to preserve oaks and sycamore trees, significant resources that contribute to the character of the valley and the community.'" The applicant should address how grading, scraping and denuding what looks to be at least 80% of the site reconciles with being sensitive to the natural environment?

6. P16. Site Analysis

Comment: No site analysis has been submitted. The site design process should begin with a thorough analysis of the site.

7. P17. Site Design Concept

Comment: General Criteria 1 and 2: There is no evident effort for the project design to comply at all with these criteria. The project ignores the rural residential character of the area, and destroys all of its natural features. As for General Criteria 3 and 4, the application does not include enough detail to determine anything about the internal integrity of the project. We will say, however, the pre-requisite site location issues make internal design details quite irrelevant. All of its failures to comply with the community's design objectives are rooted in this basic incompatibility of locating urban development in a rural area.

8. P18-22. Protection of Natural Features (to include Oaks and Sycamores)

The Guidelines state, “All development proposals shall demonstrate a diligent effort to retain existing natural features characteristic of the community’s landscape. Existing topography and land forms, drainage courses, rock outcroppings, vegetation and views shall be recorded in the Site Analysis and incorporate, to the maximum extent feasible, into the future development of the land.” See pp. 18-19 items A-H, all numbers under each item, noting the general rule, the “hand of man” is to be felt lightly”, And pp. 20-22 about mature tree preservation and handling.

Comment: No effort evident. How much of the natural environment will be left... out of how much destroyed? How many trees? Rock outcroppings? Natural canyons? Hilltops? And so forth.

9. P26-35. Architectural Character and Compact Building Groups

Comment. Chapters 5 and 6 in Part III of VC’s Design Guidelines address the array of requisite site planning and architectural approaches, and the ways these elements of design must be combined in order to produce Village development that aligns with historic patterns. Based both on the Master and the Implementing Tentative Map and Grading Plans, the Accretive plan for Village housing shows hyper-conventional suburban sprawl, little rectangular lots lined up cheek-to-jowl like rows of teeth on both sides of every road, obscuring from view the very countryside the plan claims to celebrate.

The Specific Plan Text for this project waxes rhapsodically about “Italian Hill Villages” that bear no resemblance to Accretive’s development plan for this property. Italian hill villages are characterized, first and foremost, by their location at authentic “crossroads” and their gradual development to meet the authentic needs of the surrounding authentic community; and are further characterized by their irregularity and by the charm of a built environment arranged around the natural environment. The Accretive project is a rote suburban tract overbuilt to urban densities, sprawled across remote, roadless greenfields.

Nothing but a complete revision of this plan would hope to achieve what the Guidelines or the Specific Plan Text for this project describes.

Italian hill villages are characterized by their locations at authentic well-travelled “cross-roads”, by the charms of irregularity and diversity, and by the arrangement of the built environment around the beauty of the natural landscape.



The Accretive plan imposes a monotonous sprawling geometric sameness on a contrived cut and filled landscape in a remote location. Below is a photograph of this developer’s San Elijo project that shows cuts in landscape similar to their plan for West Lilac.



10. P67. Hillside Development

Comment: The applicant's development plan will destroy the natural topography in this area and "re-grade" the land. The applicant's consultant asserts that that "contour grading" of home sites -- so that each little geometric rectangle is a few feet higher or lower than its immediate neighbor -- is the same as retaining the natural organic land forms. This is a ludicrous assertion that demonstrates the extreme extent to which this proposal contradicts the most basic concepts of rural design.

11. Landscape Concept

Susan Moore's Comments: The master TM lacks sufficient detail for a thorough review. However, from the documents that have been submitted, I can make the following comments. In my opinion, following the lot design as it does, the landscape plan is also an urban concept that needs to be completely re-done to be compatible with the property's rural surrounds. To create the "natural" character of Valley Center requires an organic, asymmetrical landscape design.

As for plant material, there are too few species; diversity (of trees, shrubs and ground covers) needs to be much greater. Several specified trees will not grow well in our zone generally and will definitely not succeed in Valley Center's colder micro-climates. Another is an allelopathic variety (suppresses growth of different plants other than itself due to release of toxic substances) tree listed for medians/entries where other plants are listed. Trees listed for the medians will not grow due to conditions that characterize road medians. "Grove" trees will not thrive in road median conditions and will be messy for automobiles and pedestrians. Fruit-producers are typically specified AWAY from streets and sidewalks where human activity is present.

Contained in the 82-pages of the Valley Center Design Guidelines are numerous diagrams and sketches, as well as lengthy descriptive copy that make all of these points, and others, quite clear. The Design Guidelines themselves are meant to work together to produce an integrated, whole objective. They cannot be cherry-picked and also produce their intent.

As in any "design", success is a result of combining the right design elements in the right way – in the right place. This project appears off the mark on all counts.

The Valley Center Design Review Board
Lael Montgomery, Chair
Jeff Herr
Susan Moore
Keith Robertson
Robson Splane