October 21, 2013

Honorable Mayor David Glass
Councilwoman Kathy Miller
Councilwoman Teresa Barrett
Councilman Gabe Kearney
Councilman Chris Albertson
Councilman Mike Healy
Councilman Mike Harris

Dear Members of the City Council,

This letter is in regards to the Maria Drive apartment project that is part of your agenda for tonight’s City Council meeting.

Although I am not directly affected by the proposed project, I have friends that are directly affected and have an interest in the outcome of the project as to its impacts upon the community at large.

I am aware that the current property is underutilized in its current form as a partially developed low-rise office complex. The proposed 144 unit apartment complex is a significant departure in the intensity of use of the parcel than what currently exists. My understanding is that in order to approve the project, a general plan amendment is required and subsequently a zoning amendment.

I think it is critical that the council take a hard look at the impacts of that decision both for the immediate neighbors and for that area of the community as a whole. The property currently acts a transition/buffer zone between a busy commercial shopping center and single family dwellings that were developed between 30 and 40 years ago. The type of density that is proposed reflects more accurately the type of infill that the council has been encouraging in the downtown core or along major surface streets such as McDowell and Petaluma Boulevard. Although the commercial center will benefit from a large residential development next door, I suspect that there may be many negative impacts on the existing residential neighbors.

Traffic is an oft cited negative consequence of large developments and it is a reality that without direct access to Washington Street or McDowell Boulevard there will be a significant impact for persons trying to negotiate streets in the immediate neighborhood around Maria Drive. I live on a street with 3 schools within about 1/3 of a mile of my house and I assure you that one of the largest traffic times are during morning drop-off and afternoon pick-up from school. Although McDowell school is within walking distance, some residents of the project will choose to pick other elementary schools and the junior high and high school are not close by. This doesn’t even address work commute traffic or weekend traffic. Although I realize it is not realistic to assume no development for the lot, it is important to consider the exponential change in traffic to the area since it will be the equivalent to 144 houses but in a much smaller geographic area than the surrounding subdivision homes.
In regards to overall development density, thought needs to be given about the expectations of the community. The City made a conscious effort to promote higher density downtown and near the bus and train transportation hubs, and I believe that there is the infrastructure and political/neighborhood interest in the downtown area to support that sort of density. The east side of town has always had a lower density character and I believe that many of the people who live on that side of the freeway have chosen to live there because of the character they feel they get by living in an area that is less dense. The proposed project turns this character upside down and puts it more in the category of recent developments along Petaluma Boulevard North and the warehouse district. Past apartment developments on the east side such as the former Lakeville Resort Apartments, Park Place, and projects off of Ely Boulevard South retained a density that was not significantly higher than the single family residential subdivisions that surrounded them. The only recent developments that are fairly high density on the east side of town are the new senior apartments near Kmart and across from Casa Grande High School. In both cases, the projects have target audiences (seniors) that do not create a large number of car trips and in the case of the project near Kmart, are not adjacent to single family homes.

My understanding is that the neighboring existing apartment project (formerly Green Tree Apartments) is interested in an increase in density. If the council allows for a 144 unit project across the street, it may set a precedent that may be hard to refuse to the existing complex looking to expand.

My main point is that careful thought must be given to the scale of the project that will be approved and as to how that will impact the neighborhood, its character and the character of the east side of town.

Sincerely,

Brent I. Russell, Architect
Petaluma, CA 94952