

**MILL VALLEY PLANNING COMMISSION**

**MINUTES**

**REGULAR MEETING OF MONDAY, FEBRUARY 10, 2014**

**COUNCIL CHAMBERS, CITY HALL, 7:00 PM**

**26 CORTE MADERA AVENUE**

PLANNING COMMISSION MEMBERS:

Heidi Richardson - Chair  
Steve Geiszler - Vice-Chair  
Ricardo Capretta  
Chris Skelton

(00:00:00)

**CALL TO ORDER**

(00:00:31)

**ORAL COMMUNICATIONS: Time for comments from members of the public on issues not on this Planning Commission agenda. (Limited to 3 minutes per person.)**

(00:04:32)

**PLANNING AND BUILDING DIRECTOR'S ORAL REPORT: Report on items being considered by the City Council.**

**LIAISON REPORTS:** None.

**APPROVAL OF MINUTES:**      **SEPTEMBER 9 & 23, 2013**  
   **OCTOBER 14, 2013**  
   **NOVEMBER 12, 2013**  
   **DECEMBER 9, 2013**  
   **JANUARY 13, 2014**

It was **M/s** by Vice-Chair Geiszler/Commissioner Skelton to approve minutes from SEPTEMBER 9 & 23, 2013, OCTOBER 14, 2013, NOVEMBER 12, 2013, DECEMBER 9, 2013 and JANUARY 13, 2014 as amended and abstained. The motion was carried 4/0.

(00:12:52)

**APPROVAL OF AGENDA:**

It was **M/s** by Vice-Chair Geiszler/Commissioner Skelton to approve the agenda. The motion was carried 4/0.

Planning Commission Minutes

APPROVED

2/10/2014

## **PUBLIC HEARINGS**

(00:13:03)

- 1. 227 Elm Avenue – OXB Studios Architects – Design Review – File No. PL13-4098 (Zanarini) A DESIGN REVIEW hearing for the demolition of an existing residence and construction of a new 1,837 square foot two-story residence with a 442 square foot attached garage on a 5,250 square foot lot. This project includes a Categorical Exemption from CEQA. The subject property is in the RS-6 (Single-Family Residential – 6,000 square foot minimum lot size) Zoning District.**

*227 Elm Avenue doc*

(00:13:08)

**Staff Presentation from Associate Planner, Tom Zanarini**

(00:17:01)

**Presentation from Architect, Ted Bonneau**

(00:24:17)

**Presentation from Landscape Architect Matthew Kennedy**

(00:37:55)

**Public Comment** (None)

(00:38:19)

**Commission Deliberation**

Commissioner Skelton began by stating he preferred the original 6/12 sloped roof and that the current 8/12 slope seems steep and he wondered if by lowering the pitch and reducing the height it might be more aesthetically pleasing. He said would like to see the white trim on the skylight removed or integrated more with the roof color scheme. He said he is okay with the lot coverage because this is small lot and it is well designed and fits in with the neighborhood. He noted he is concerned about the amount of pavers, however he likes the idea of them being spaced such that they are semi-permeable, however he suggested they be eliminated along the north side of the house. He stated that overall he likes the improved home very much. He said he liked how the original intent of using the space in the back was maintained by utilizing that space with the covered patio so it is not lost.

Vice-Chair Geiszler stated the current plan is a huge improvement from the massing standpoint and a more fleshed out design resulting in an attractive home that fits into the neighborhood better, particularly the one-car garage door. He said he believes there will be more discussion regarding the size of the one-car garage because if the laundry were enclosed and moved into the house the FAR would be over, although it might be over anyway depending on how the barbecue

is looked at. With respect to the roof, he said he is comfortable with the articulation of the dormers, although they may be a little bit bulky. He stated he likes an 8/12 roof pitch, which is elegant from a proportion standpoint. He said he finds the rest of the house quite attractive and likes how the covered porches break the two-story wall planes. He stated he recognized that on 50-foot lots there is generally one unbroken façade, so he can live with it here, particularly since the dormers with cantilevers break it down. He said he thinks dropping the dormers down to at least 8 feet, since they are having them sloped and articulating that volume inside, it shouldn't be a hardship inside the bedroom and it will relieve some of the top heaviness. He suggested the pavers be reduced to stepping-stones on the north side and the patio areas off the covered porches on the southwest side.

Commissioner Capretta echoed his fellow commissioners that the current plan is much better designed. He said he also believes the site placement is better and more in character with the setbacks on the surrounding homes. He said one of his biggest issues is the amount of impervious surface, which is odd for a site with drainage issues. He believes at the very least there should be less pavers and that the pavers that are installed should be semi-pervious instead of solid concrete. His other issue is the elevations. He agreed with Vice-Chair Geiszler that the building feels top heavy. He likes that the balcony was eliminated but he thinks the dormers should be lowered into the roof. He noted there is still an uninterrupted ridgeline and he would like to see an interrupted ridgeline. He said the skylight heightens the ridge and needs to be looked at, especially because they have received letters regarding it from neighbors. He said he could maybe support some as long as they were below the ridgeline and complementary to the roof. With respect to the materials, he expressed disappointment in the asphalt shingles in lieu of the zinc and thinks the proposed roof on the original application was much nicer. He appreciated that undergrounding the electrical is being considered and believes that would be a good feature for any new home in Mill Valley.

Chair Richardson agreed with Vice-Chair Geiszler and Commissioner Capretta that the house looks too tall and the dormers do not do enough to break it up. She suggested that because this is mostly a hip-roofed house except for the main ridgeline the bedroom or the front could be hipped back to alleviate the top heaviness. She noted there is a tremendous amount of lot coverage and she thinks the pavers are a bad idea. She agreed with her fellow commissioners with regard to the skylight. She noted that since she has been on the Planning Commission they have not approved any garage that is almost 500 square feet for one car. She also noted that the space in the garage is for circulation and could not be used for storage. She said the white color does not help the house look smaller and she would like to see the color deepened a little bit.

Commissioner Skelton agreed that the Commission does not want to promote 500 square foot one-car garages on small lots; however he thought putting a cap on the garage size could substantially affect the overall design, which the Commission members liked. He added that the mudroom and washer and dryer in the garage flows naturally and there could be some storage there as well.

Commissioner Capretta stated he is fine with the garage size on this application because the scale is well done and the Commission already asked the applicant to reduce the garage from two-car to one-car, which was done.

Vice-Chair Geiszler stated it is troubling that the applicant has used the code that says a 500 square foot garage and they have put some things out in the garage. He agreed with Chair Richardson that it is not storage space they way it is designed; it is all circulation space. He said he would be in favor of allowing this garage size as designed because the applicant has made changes requested by the Commission, including moving the house forward. He added he is not in favor of having the skylight rise up higher and making it a feature; rather he would like it to be reduced in length and height to the absolute minimum. With respect to the unbroken ridgeline, he would not be in favor of changing it to a hipped roof, because he likes the gable. He noted there is the potential to drop the ridgeline over the master bedroom and make the space thinner so the ridgeline would shift over and break, and there is also the potential of dropping part of the stairwell to a lower height and creating some sort of articulation there.

Commissioner Skelton noted that the homes across the street and up the hill had comparable unbroken ridgelines and so he does not have an issue with it. He believes the dormers articulate the roof enough to draw attention away from the long ridgeline. He said he would not like to see the roof hipped at the back or front, especially at the front, because it would not have the same approachability that it has from the street right now. He stated he is fine with the color. He agreed with his fellow commissioners that there is a large amount of lot coverage but he does not want to see the pavers removed from the patio area. However, he could see them being removed from the entire walk-around to reduce the amount of surface coverage and instead turn it into natural stone or steps. He would not extend the pavers beyond the railing leading back to the furthest west covered patio, but they make sense in the patio area.

Commissioner Capretta stated he is okay with some skylights but did not think it should be a major feature nor should it be higher than the ridgeline.

Commissioner Skelton, Vice-Chair Geiszler and Chair Richardson agreed with Commissioner Capretta with respect to the skylights.

Commissioner Skelton stated he thinks the unbroken ridgeline is fine.

Commissioner Capretta stated the house seems over-dormered to him and seems too tall on the second floor. He believes there is an opportunity at the very least to articulate the ridgeline at the front where there is the entry stair and reconfigure that bedroom, perhaps by making those two dormers one and squaring up the bedrooms. He agreed with Vice-Chair Geiszler that he likes the 8/12 form.

Commissioner Capretta replied there is a natural opportunity to articulate the ridge where it matters the most, because the closet is right there, to move the bedroom piece in a bit and perhaps make the two ridges into one. He said he does not like the idea of gabbling the front, that

he likes the 8/12 form. He thought the plans need to be worked a bit because the home is too top heavy and too tall from the front.

Vice-Chair Geiszler noted the one dormer on the north side is into the stairwell, which may have been an effort to break up the north façade, but there are probably other ways to do that rather than extending the dormer beyond the plate line, like maybe let the plate line carry through and do a cantilever bay below it to get rid of some of the top heaviness.

Commissioner Capretta noted there are 640 square feet of covered porches and 2,740 square feet of lot coverage. He said the house has a huge footprint because all the porches are covered, although architecturally they look nice. He said the front and side porches are fine, however the large back porch leads to large site coverage.

Commissioner Skelton said he would hate to remove the back porch under the justification that it adds to height, bulk and mass when that back area is useless otherwise, and not visible to the public.

Vice-Chair Geiszler stated he would like to see a 50% reduction in the concrete pavers.

Commissioner Capretta said he would support a 50% reduction in the concrete pavers and would like to see semi-pervious pavers.

Vice-Chair Geiszler stated he is bothered by the amount of impervious coverage there is in the pavers, walkways and driveway in addition to a very large, maxed out house with covered porches.

Vice-Chair Geiszler said he is okay with the house color.

Commissioner Capretta said he is also okay with the house color, however he'd prefer to see more articulation of color.

It was **M/s** by Vice-Chair Geisler/Commissioner Capretta to continue the hearing for 227 Elm Avenue to the Consent Calendar at the February 24, 2014 meeting. The motion was carried 4/0.

(01:37:32)

**2. City of Mill Valley – Planning Commission 2014 Work Program – (Moore)**

*2014 Work Program doc*

(01:42:37)

Commission Deliberation

Chair Richardson began by stating the Residential Design Guidelines all apply to the flats, except Guideline #1, Integration with Topography, Guideline #2, Relationship of Building Size to Slope, and Guideline #12, Minimize Landscape Terracing, but there are issues that the Planning Commission addresses with their favorite guidelines, which are Guideline #10, Minimizing Off Haul and Guideline #17, Scale, Mass and Height, that do seem different in the flats. She noted that garages are a bigger issue in the flats, because in the hills they are needed because there is no other place to park and it seems to be a part of the scale, mass and height question that the Commission addresses when talking about garages in the flats. She stated the Commission has done a good job of addressing basements. She said long unbroken planes seem to be more of an issue in the flats in the narrow lots than up in the hills. Finally she noted that one of the struggles with the flatter areas in town, especially areas that are mostly one-story homes, is when the Commission sees a new two-story house in a neighborhood with neighbors or adjacent properties with one-stories and that it seems more complicated than the guidelines may suggest.

Commissioner Capretta agreed with Chair Richardson but said when it came to taking away entitlements the Commission would be better served by getting clear direction from the City Council. He said he believes the Design Review Guidelines need a cleanup across the board, with the exception of the basement paragraph that was just cleaned up. He said when the Zoning Code says people can build two-story homes how does the Planning Commission justify telling people they cannot have two-story homes? He said he believes the Planning Commission has done a good job of addressing the issue of second stories.

Vice-Chair Geiszler stated if the Commission feels there is a reason to change the height limit or have a separate subset of Design Review Guidelines for the flats, then it should be taken to the City Council and if the Council thinks it's a good idea, then they should work on it. He pointed out that many applicants might feel the Planning Commission has not handled the issue of second stories well. He said he would like the applicants to have an idea of the possibility of success before they come in.

Commissioner Capretta agreed with Vice-Chair Geiszler that applicants should know their chances of success beforehand and suggested they could add some bulk to Guideline #17, Scale, Mass and Height, to better define how the Commission approves applications.

Chair Richardson stated it could be as simple as illustrating the Residential Design Guidelines with some diagrams and amendments.

Commissioner Skelton stated that he supports some of the zoning regulations or Residential Design Guidelines being fine tuned and said he has struggled to identify consistency. He agreed with Commissioner Capretta that there are significant areas that could be clarified and improved to better articulate while being careful not to infringe on any possible entitlements. He said he thinks there is an opportunity to differentiate and create unique Design Review Guidelines for both the flats and hillsides and he agreed with Vice-Chair Geiszler that there are some guidelines that fall by the wayside when speaking about the flats.

(02:00:49)

**Public Comment**

(02:21:03)

**Commission Deliberation**

Commissioner Capretta began by stating that his goal is a better process to make it easier for architects to get their projects approved. He said he finds that at the incomplete study sessions the architects miss the opportunity to discuss critical things and then they come back to a design review hearing and get blindsided. He believes if architects have a better quality study session they will get through design review much easier and quicker. He echoed Vice-Chair Geiszler's statement about giving the applicants some predictability about how they can get their project approved. He said what is good about study sessions is they are open discussions, a collaboration of ideas between the Planning Commission and an applicant. He said although the Planning Commission finds study sessions useful that perhaps it should be optional for the applicant.

Commissioner Skelton stated he is interested in taking stock of the physical reality of the consequences of recent approvals as a way to contemplate what the Commission wants to see for the next 10 to 20 years by learning from its past successes and failures. He stated although he was initially against mandatory study sessions he has come to see them as a valuable tool and he would not want them to become optional because they provide the opportunity to engage in an informal discussion that cannot be accomplished at a design review hearing. He said he believes study sessions should become more of a stepping-stone to the design review hearing.

Vice-Chair Geiszler stated he thought the City's requirements are consistent with and no more onerous than those of other communities. He said that, thanks to staff, when they get a project package it is quite complete, except for the streetscape elevation. He said Commissioner Capretta's list of requirements is fairly consistent with what the Commission is asking, although he is not sure there is value in existing block outline elevation over proposed, because the story poles put it in context, not necessarily the drawing. He stated that when only the corners are outlined the height of the building is not seen, and while he understands story poles are expensive he would advocate for maybe two ridge poles as well so it gives the corner some context. He said he finds the site study sessions useful and he likes the informality of them and the back and forth dialogue with the applicant. With respect to the informality of the regular design review sessions, he is in favor of it if they think they are going to approve the project with conditions. He said however if the Commission is not going to approve the application and will have it come back to them again, then he wants to be sure the applicant is clear on what the Commission is asking them to change. Regarding Chair Richardson's suggestion that the Design Review Guidelines be illustrated, he said he thinks they are descriptive in helping the applicant understand how the Commission wants the project to fit into a neighborhood, so he thinks as long as the descriptions or illustrations are good it would be beneficial and would not limit the architects.

Commissioner Capretta stated he thinks the Study Session requirement list is pretty minimal, because they don't require a rendering or model.

Vice-Chair Geiszler said he is more concerned with the hardscape than the landscape, because he is less concerned about how many plants there is going to be than he is about how tall the walls are and how much paving material there would be. However one aspect of landscaping they do talk about is screening.

Chair Richardson stated one issue that is more important in the hills, although the flats have it as well, is reducing the existing landscape with the VMPs [Vegetation Management Plans], that the Planning Commission needs to see what it would be when all the trees and plants are gone, which is why the Commission needs the landscape plan. In the past the Commission has received computer rendered models that show existing vegetation that is going away, and that has delayed projects. She suggested her fellow commissioners make a list of eight to ten of the requirements, such as scale and mass, screening, off haul, lawn, broken lines, hardscape, garage doors, etc. that the Commission sees that are the push points that consistently have to come back, and then let the applicants design their own study session and decide which of these requirements they want to address during the study session. This puts the burden on the applicant and the Commission can respond to that and anything else they might see, and then it can come back for design review. She agreed with Vice-Chair Geiszler that most communities ask for at least this much information and in most communities a project cannot get through without two sessions, but they call the first design review session the study session.

Vice-Chair Geiszler agreed that presenting a list of requirements is a good idea, but he thought it would be a good idea if the staff also came up with a list of issues that they hear reoccurring from applicants. He said he believes they do need to have a structured list of requirements, because if there are no standards and the applicants do not get through the process in two sessions then they take up someone else's slot.

Chair Richardson suggested the Commission consider a limit of three meetings every 12 months going forward to avoid projects that take up too many sessions with their "baby steps."

Commissioner Capretta said with respect to slopes with greater than 5% a concept grading plan and cut and fill calculations should be required.

Chair Richardson said it should be spelled out that site plans require topography, existing and new grading. She agreed with Commissioner Capretta that cut and fill calculations should be required, that that is one of the push points.

Commissioner Capretta suggested the cut and fill calculations should be done by an architect for the study sessions but by a civil engineer for design review hearings.

Vice-Chair Geiszler said site strategy in the flats usually doesn't have a lot of options while site strategy in the hills has many more. He wondered if they are once again creating a distinction

between the flats and the hillside and saying a site strategy session in the hillside absolutely makes sense but doing a site strategy on the flats doesn't make sense and ought to be called a design review and see if they can get it through in two meetings.

Chair Richardson stated she had seen applications go sideways because neighbors were not notified at the appropriate time, or not notified at all, or came in too late, etc. She said she would hate to think they have to get so rigid as to require a neighborhood meeting prior to a study session, but that is something she sees a couple of times a year. With regard to a statement that story poles are too expensive, she said the problem is that more complicated and expensive designs lead to more complicated and expensive story poles, but with story poles the more expense invested the more feedback is given, so it is important that they be required for design review. She believes the reduced formality of the study sessions is what is great about them and she agrees with Vice-Chair Geiszler's idea about opening it to the architect when the Commission is going to condition something and said that has been helpful when the Commission has done it. She also said she believes end of the year site visits for Commissioners is a good educational tool because they can see the end results of projects.

Vice-Chair Geiszler said he likes having drawings at a quarter-inch scale and he finds one-foot contours to be very helpful.

(03:29:10)

**Public Comment**

(03:30:21)

**ADJOURN**

It was **M/s** by Commissioner Skelton/Commissioner Capretta to adjourn. The motion was carried 4/0.

*Any decision made by the Planning Commission on the above items may be appealed to the City Council by filing a letter with the Planning Department within 10 calendar days describing the basis for the appeal accompanied by the \$250 appeal fee.*