Gerry De Young (Ruth + Going) and Deke Hunter (Hunter Properties) met with the Cherryview Lane II neighborhood group on Thursday, December 1. The meeting was attended by about 20 people, including Don Rocha, District 9 council member. The purpose was to present a status report on Almaden Ranch. We all recall that their Environmental Impact Report was rejected by the San Jose Planning Commission on August 24. This rejection was based on two issues, inadequate accounting for water requirements and the absence of an evaluation of the blight that this development might impose on the neighborhood. Both these issues were raised by an environmental attorney from San Francisco. I have assumed that he was retained by Cherryview people.

The water issue has been discharged by a letter from San Jose Water. The blight assessment is nearly done, and De Young believes that the Almaden Ranch will receive a clean bill of health on that issue. In terms of the overall schedule, the zoning request will go back to the Planning Commission in late February. Assuming that goes well, the zoning can be approved by the San Jose City Council before the end of March. A development plan is being prepared in parallel with the zoning actions, and De Young believes that it is possible to have Planning Department approval by the end of April. That would support a construction start in the summer of 2012. The pace may be driven by the weather because it doesn’t make sense to do grading during the rainy season. It is possible that the project could be open for business sometime in 2014.

The drawing that De Young had in hand on December 1 did not seem to differ from the one he presented on August 24. It consists of four distinct regions:

I. Extending about 600 feet east from Almaden Expressway is the Village Green area. It is mainly small establishments clustered around a grassy square, designed to be very pedestrian friendly.

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1 Hunter Properties manages dozens of office and retail locations in this area. Some of the larger and more visible examples are Old Town Los Gatos and McCarthy Ranch Marketplace in Milpitas. To clarify the players, Arcadia is the property owner, Hunter Properties, perhaps through Hunter-Storm LLC, is responsible for the management, and Ruth + Going are civil engineers managing both the planning and most of the communications.

2 An earlier meeting, dealing with Walmart, was attended by about 80 people. The new Walmart is immediately behind homes along Cherryview Lane.
II. The middle zone lies east of the Village Green zone, and it has parking extending south from Cherry Avenue to the fronts of several large retail sites, typically in the 30,000 to 50,000 square foot range. These stores’ backs are positioned roughly 80 to 100 feet from CA 85.

III. The east zone is defined on its north and east by the curve of Cherry Avenue as it reaches down to Sanchez. This zone will be dedicated to a single big box store. The gross square footage is about 120,000, and the net retail space is planned at 102,000 square feet. Again, this backs up to CA85 with the same 80 foot clearance, and the parking area lies between the store and Cherry Avenue.

IV. The final zone lies between Cherry Ave. and the Guadalupe River. Because of the city’s riparian corridor requirements, the 100 feet along the river will be sort of park like. There will be a handful of commercial structures along Cherry, with one region of parking along Cherry and more parking behind the buildings.

Deke Hunter said that he would build office buildings on speculation, but not retail space. Thus, the final building plans will reflect the needs and desires of the tenants. Further, Hunter said that unoccupied retail space is too much of a downer; it makes people uncomfortable. He said that they are talking to a number of potential tenants, and many of them do not yet have any presence in the Bay Area. De Young and Hunter have both tried to by coy about who these prospects are, but from their discussion, it appears that Lowe’s had been considering the 100,000 square foot site. However, they backed away when the EIR was rejected. Hunter suggested that they could still be coming in, but the issue remains open.

Both Shiloh Ballard and I asked questions about the design and the design quality. My points were that, taken as a whole, Almaden Ranch is not very pedestrian friendly. The Village Green area is, but the balance south of Cherry is behind a sea of parking. Further, the riverside area is not well connected to the balance of the center.

The traffic issues abound. For instance, the entrance about 200 feet north of the CA 85 ramp is still there, but it is and will remain an entrance only. However, part of the traffic mitigation includes a right-on-red from westbound CA85 to northbound Almaden Expressway. The free right turn will certainly serve one lane, and it may extend to two lanes, which implies widening that ramp from CA85.

The radius of curvature of Cherry Avenue will support a speed limit of 35 MPH, which will contribute to the isolation between the north and south sides of Cherry. Apparently, part of the traffic mitigation for the Blossom Hill/Almaden Expressway intersection comes from folks’ cutting through from westbound Blossom Hill to northbound Almaden Expressway via Sanchez and Cherry. De Young is certain there will be one stop light along the Almaden Ranch stretch of Cherry. A second light remains in dispute between Almaden Ranch and San Jose. A third light is not likely to be considered, even though there is a third driveway.

Clearly, the Cherry/Almaden Expressway intersection is most sensitive point for Almaden Ranch. The first driveway from Cherry into Almaden Ranch parking is positioned about 600 feet from the Almaden Expressway intersection. That driveway is also the site of the undisputed stop light.
One questioner that I didn’t recognize was particularly critical about the plans for the Cherry/Almaden Expressway intersection. She was particularly concerned about the difficulties seniors and school children might experience crossing a significantly widened Almaden Expressway. De Young really had no good answers for her concerns. He pointed out that Santa Clara County has demanded the lion’s share of green time for the Expressway, even though that may create back-ups on Cherry and challenges for slow crossers. Green time will become even more of a challenge because a pedestrian crossing will be added in line with the south side of Cherry, not just the north side as it is now.

My opinion is that the pedestrian hazards presented by Almaden Expressway are pre-existing conditions. Almaden Ranch may make them moderately worse, but the problem is built-in. The only way to make the Cherry/Almaden Expressway pedestrian friendly would be to use an overpass. In order to serve people with mobility challenges, elevators would be needed. While there is money to do that on the Las Vegas strip, that kind of cash is not visible here.

Another question concerned fast food restaurants. De Young answered that by pointing out that there was only a single pad which might serve a drive-through. This is probably not a complete answer because fast food can exist without a drive-through.

One questioner wished for a grocery store. The answer was a probable “Yes.” My own opinion is that another grocery is more needed at Via Valente than Almaden Ranch. There is a new grocery going in where Orchard Supply used to be on Branham. Safeway, just north of Almaden Ranch is clearly a grocery, Costco and Walmart both sell groceries, and there are three other outlets nearby, Whole Foods, Trader Joe’s and a green grocer.

I indirectly asked if the Almaden Ranch, at about $200 per square foot, was going in “on the cheap.” Zeke Hunter responded that Rivermark Plaza, one of the local examples of better design, cost less than that figure.

On balance, I expect to be disappointed in Almaden Ranch because of the prominence it gives to parking. I will be disappointed because Cherry Avenue will not be an inviting walking street as it passes through Almaden Ranch. On the other hand, the parking areas are planned to be broken up with generous tracts of trees. From most passing streets, it will look pretty woodsy. Since De Young described Almaden Ranch as generally mid-scale center, it promises to be a reasonably direct competitor for Oakridge. At the end of the day, the quality of Almaden Ranch will be determined by the stores that it is able to attract.

The site plan that De Young showed on December 1 is appended to this note. It is representative of a case where the anchor store A1 sells building supplies. Obviously, a different tenant mix would result in a different site plan. Even if a Lowe’s were to move in, the plan could easily change.
Tree Legend

- Acer rubrum
- Acer rubrum ‘Armstrong’
- Arbustus marina
- Carpinus betulus ‘fastigiata’
- Olea europaea
- Platanus x acerifolia ‘Bloodgood’
- Platanus racemosa
- Poplar nigra italica
- Quercus lobata
- Quercus robur ‘Fastigiata’
- Tristaria taurina
- Washingtonia filifera
- Washingtonia robusta
- Existing tree to remain

Red maple
Armstrong maple
Marina strawberry tree
Fastigiata European hornbeam
Olive
London plane tree
California sycamore
Lombardy poplar
Valley oak
Columnar English oak
Water gum
California fan palm
Mexican fan palm