



COMMITTEE FOR
GREEN FOOTHILLS



Sequoia
Audubon
Society

May 10, 2002

Chairman Steve Patrick and Planning Commissioners
Woodside Planning Commission
Woodside Town Hall
PO Box 620005
Woodside, CA 94062

Re: Consideration of Conditional Use Permit Applications and Variance Applications for Phillips Brooks School

Dear Chairman Patrick and Members of the Planning Commission,

On behalf of the Committee for Green Foothills, Acterra, and the Loma Prieta Chapter of Sierra Club, which together represent nearly 30,000 Peninsula-area residents, we are writing in strong support of the professional and thoughtful Staff Report regarding this project. In particular, we agree with the Staff's conclusions that (a) the project does not comply with numerous key policies of the Town's carefully crafted General Plan, (b) at least four of the mandatory six findings required by State and the Town's Municipal Code can not be made for the requested Conditional Use Permits, and (c) the mandatory findings in order to approve the requested Variances cannot be made.

We believe that your role as Planning Commissioners, first and foremost, is to determine whether the project complies with the General Plan, Zoning and other applicable Town and State regulations. In our comments on the Draft EIR, we enumerated several (but by no means all) of the important General Plan policies that the project would violate. We were pleased to see that the Staff's evaluation concurs with our key points. The April 10, 2001 Staff Report, on page 11, states:

"In summary, the proposed institutional school use is not a low-intensity use as is envisioned by the General Plan for residential areas of the Town, is not for local residents, does not provide (n.b., we believe this should state 'does not contribute...') to the general well-being of the community, generates excess traffic, is not accessed from an arterial, and is thus not consistent with the Woodside General Plan. This finding cannot be made."

With respect to density or intensity of use, the property is designated in the General Plan as Residential – Environmentally Sensitive Area, and is zoned Special Conservation Planning, which is a rural residential zoning district that requires reduced human densities due to its sensitive nature. An institutional facility that would concentrate 340 people daily on the property (plus unquantified but extensive additional numbers of people associated with use of sports facilities, after school and on weekends) is inconsistent with this low density rural residential zoning.

The traffic generated by the school would create both a safety and a traffic flow problem at the intersection of Lawler Ranch Road and Sand Hill Road. Any project (in this case a private school serving the greater Peninsula region) that would trigger the recommendation for a traffic signal by both the Town Engineer and the County of San Mateo Public Works Department, is clearly not a "low intensity use." We would also point out that an institutional use of this intensity is not compatible with the residential neighborhood.

The most direct violation of General Plan policy is the project's location at the end of a mile-long, narrow, rural two-lane cul-de-sac that would serve a maximum of 13 residences, based on the area's zoning. The General Plan's clear language of P45 states: "Institutions shall have access from arterial roads." To reinterpret this clear

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language to imply that “access from arterial roads” can mean “access eventually from an arterial road” (in this case after traversing a mile of a minor rural road) would put the Town in a precarious situation with respect to all of its minor roads. All minor rural roads in Woodside eventually have access from an arterial road, and for that matter, eventually have access from the I-280 freeway. The policy, coupled with numerous other General Plan locational policies for non-residential uses, clearly means that institutions shall be located where access would not create traffic impacts on the rural residential areas and their roads.

We also support the Staff’s analysis of the impossibility of making the necessary findings to grant the requested Variances for the project. Variances are used to allow development to deviate from the requirements of the Zoning Regulations where, because of special circumstances, strict enforcement would make it difficult or impossible to develop a parcel, or would cause unnecessary hardships to the property owner. This is often due to physical constraints or other unusual characteristics of the parcel. In this case, with a 92-acre parcel, any number of proposals could be located, designed, and restricted in size to comply with the zoning and other applicable regulations; instead, the developer is requesting Variances for a project that (a) would require alterations of slopes that exceed 35% (near the proposed gymnasium, bridge #3 and the earthen impoundment/detention basin), and (b) would necessitate exceeding the limit on paved areas. We concur with the Staff’s conclusion that the findings for these Variances cannot be made.

Finally, we would like to point out that an institutional use on this site is not permitted by right in this zoning district, but would be permitted only as a conditionally permitted use. Given the institutional nature of the project, the intensity of use, the constraints to development because of topography, geography, and special environmental qualities of the site, and the lack of compatibility of the proposed use with the rural qualities of Woodside, we do not believe the Town has any choice but to deny the project.

We will only briefly mention here the significant loss of the breathtaking views across the property from I-280, the significant losses of a large area of natural Blue Oak woodlands, natural grasslands, wetlands, and riparian areas, and the indirect impacts on the oak woodlands and important understory wildlife habitat that would be required by the Fire Management Plan (which was not included in the EIR for public review and evaluation).

Our organizations are supportive of the school’s mission and purpose, but this intensive institutional development is simply not the right use for this environmentally sensitive site, and does not provide reason to violate the Town’s General Plan and undermine years of sound land use planning in Woodside.

Sincerely,

-- Signed--

Lennie Roberts, Legislative Advocate
Committee for Green Foothills

-- Signed--

David Smernoff, Executive Director
Acterra

-- Signed--

Dan Kalb, Chapter Director
Sierra Club, Loma Prieta Chapter

-- Signed--

Robin Winslow Smith, President
Sequoia Audubon Society

cc: Town Councilmembers
Susan George, Town Manager