

LA JOLLA LIGHT

Enlightening La Jolla Since 1913

Controversial student center proposed again

Wednesday, July 09, 2008

By Dave Schwab (daves@lajollalight.com)

Hillel of San Diego was back before the La Jolla Community Planning Association (LJCPA) last week with a slightly reworked development proposal for Site 653, a controversial plan to build a 12,000-square-foot Jewish student center on a small triangular parcel across from UCSD that neighbors want preserved as open space.

The Site 653 parcel abuts a single-family neighborhood surrounded by La Jolla Scenic Drive North, La Jolla Scenic Way and La Jolla Village Drive in the La Jolla Shores Planned District.

"The project we're submitting now is brand new, though it's 99 percent identical to the previous project that was submitted in 2003-04," said Joshua Richman representing Hillel during the public comment section of the July 3 LJCPA monthly meeting. "Some of the changes are: We've made a green building. Most of the building will be powered by photovoltaic."

Richman said Hillel's reconstituted proposal for Site 653 also calls for planting more than 60 trees onsite. He added there have been additional studies done on the project site. "We've updated or done new major studies on all the major aspects of the project - biology, cultural resources, etc.," Richman said. "The (student center) building will take approximately 36 percent of the project site and will be done in two phases."

The first phase of the Hillel project will be retrofitting an existing single-family residence onsite for temporary use by the Jewish organization. Build-out of the new student center will be the project's second phase.

"Our schedule going forward is to present to the planning association's subcommittees and then present back with you (LJCPA) as a full project in August," Richman said. "Our goal is to have the project to the (city) Planning Commission and the City Council by November."

Richman said Hillel's justification for its need for a new student center remains unchanged. "We think it's a good use of unproductive land in La Jolla," he said. "We've taken extra steps with the community regarding concerns about the project, parking and biology in particular. We'll be planting much native landscape. Hillel of San Diego will be responsible, respectful neighbors in addressing the concerns of the community."

A lawsuit seeking to block Hillel's proposed development was filed by La Jolla Shores Association community advisory group and Taxpayers For Responsible Land Use, a grass-roots group of La Jolla residents opposed to the project, following a favorable 6-2 vote on the project in May 2006 by the City Council.

Council President Scott Peters, whose First Council District includes La Jolla, had sought a compromise position with the proposed Hillel development. Peters convinced his Council colleagues not to lease the city-owned Site 653 parcel, but rather sell it for \$940,000.

Peters also attached conditions to approval of the Hillel project, which are likely to add \$500,000 or more to the project's cost. Those conditions, among others, included: Capping building carrying capacity at 250,400 for special events; limiting the number of special events the first year of operation to six; requiring the applicant to provide a minimum of 68 on-site underground parking spaces, as well as maintain a shared parking agreement with UCSD for 67 spaces of overflow parking on campus for Shabbat services; require creation of a Traffic Demand Management Plan; prohibit overnight events or rental to outside groups for commercial purposes; and prohibit alcohol consumption onsite except for religious purposes.

It was a "split decision" in an Aug. 16 judicial ruling last year on the lawsuit brought against Hillel by La Jolla Shores Association and Taxpayers for Responsible Land Use. In a victory for those opposing Hillel's student center plans, the judge upheld a prior ruling that the student center project requires further environmental review to evaluate the potential for nesting raptor birds in the area, as well as the impacts of pedestrian crossing on Friday evenings on La Jolla Village Drive, a peak usage time when the student center would be

hosting well-attended religious services.

However, in a clear victory for Hillel, the judge upheld that the city's sale of the property to Hillel was proper under the California Environmental Quality Act (CEQA), and that Hillel did not have to return the property to the city. The conditions of that judicial decision have since been appealed.

Robert Lapidus, chair of Hillel's Facilities Committee, said Hillel's new proposal on developing Site 653 is intended to address, once and for all, all environmental, parking and traffic concerns related to the project. "The court found two issues that needed further addressing: raptor birds and the pedestrian crossing on La Jolla Village Drive," he said. "The court found no other traffic, parking or environmental impacts. So we (Hillel) decided to go down two tracks: one was appealing the ruling of the court, and the other was to resubmit our project and address those two issues that need to be fixed."

Attorney Todd Cardiff representing opponents of Hillel on Site 653, said his side wants to have the city's sale of the triangular site to Hillel overturned. "If the sale is not rescinded by the Court of Appeals," said Cardiff, "it will be a foregone conclusion that the Hillel (student) center will be at Site 653. If the Court of Appeals doesn't rescind that sale, there's no way the city is going to be able to mitigate the impact of traffic, parking and the quality of life in the neighborhood. It's simply the wrong project in the wrong place."

Site 653 neighbors have opposed Hillel's site development plans on grounds that private, institutional development will increase traffic, noise, pollution, parking and safety hazards, directly impacting the single-family zoned residential community's livability. Besides removing one of the last vestiges of open space, neighbors argue construction of a new Jewish center on the site would set a precedent for other mixed-use development. Neighbors have also argued that the disputed property has always been intended in the La Jolla community plan to be a buffer, in perpetuity, between the neighborhood and UCSD.

Dave Schwab

Dave Schwab is the Managing Editor of La Jolla Light. Contact Dave at (858) 875-5951 or daves@lajollalight.com.