



Planning & Transportation Commission

Staff Report (ID # 7451)

Report Type: Action Items **Meeting Date:** 1/11/2017

Summary Title: 670 Los Trancos: New Single Family Residence

Title: PUBLIC HEARING / QUASI-JUDICIAL MATTER. 670 Los Trancos Road [16PLN-00266]: Site and Design Review to Allow the Construction of a Single Family House and Guest House With a Total of 10,959 Square Feet. Environmental Assessment: Categorically Exempt From the California Environmental Quality Act (CEQA) Pursuant to Guidelines Section 15303 (New Construction or Conversion of Small Structures). Zoning District: OS

From: Hillary Gitelman

Recommendation

It is recommended that the Planning and Transportation Commission (PTC) take the following action(s):

1. Continue the project to a date uncertain with guidance to the applicant regarding strategies to better comply with applicable findings.

Report Summary

The applicant proposes to construct a two-story single family house, detached guest house, and associated site improvements on the undeveloped property located at 670 Los Trancos Road. The site is located in the Open Space (OS) zoning district, which permits limited housing development. The proposed house is 9,363 square feet, not including approximately 2,100 square feet of exempt basement area, and the proposed detached guest house is 1,596 square feet. Development in excess of 1,000 square feet and requires PTC review of the Site and Design Review application. The Commission's recommendation will be forwarded to the City Council.

Attachment A provides four objectives included in Palo Alto Municipal Code (PAMC) Section 18.30(G).060 for Site and Design Review approval for the Planning and Transportation Commission to review and apply toward the project.

In addition to these Site and Design Review objectives, PAMC Section 18.28.070 (p) codifies twelve Open Space Development Review Criteria that are applicable to the project. These criteria are also included in Attachment A.

While the project does incorporate a variety of measures to be compatible with environmental and ecological objectives of the open space district, staff is concerned that the residence could be perceived as visually intrusive from public roadways and public parklands.

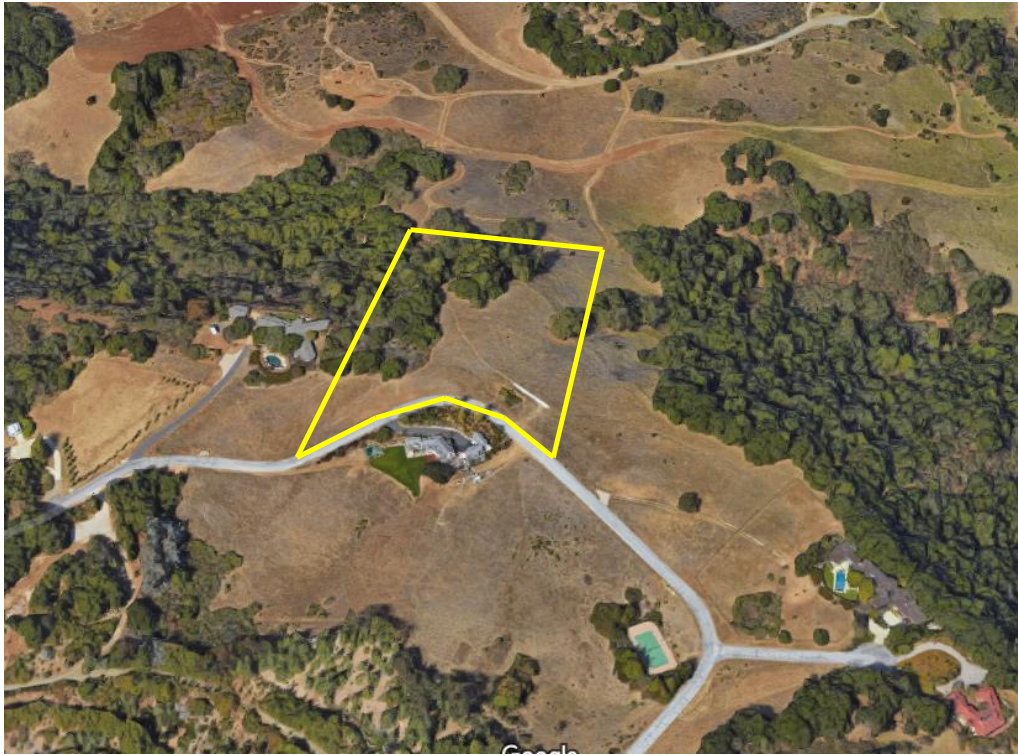
Background

Project Information

Owners:	Noa Grant and Guy Gecht
Architect:	Michael Anglisano; McClean Design
Representative:	N/A
Legal Counsel:	N/A

Property Information

Address:	670 Los Trancos Road
Neighborhood:	Palo Alto Hills
Lot Dimensions & Area:	5.42 acres (235,898 sf)
Housing Inventory Site:	No
Located w/in a Plume:	No
Protected/Heritage Trees:	Yes, protected live and valley oaks are present across the property
Historic Resource(s):	No
Existing Improvement(s):	Vacant lot
Existing Land Use(s):	Vacant lot
Adjacent Land Uses & Zoning:	North: Arastradero Preserve, Public Facilities (Site and Design Combining) District West: Single Family Residence, Open Space District East: Vacant, Open Space District South: Single Family Residence, Open Space District
Special Setbacks:	Not applicable
Aerial View of Property:	



Aerial Photograph Source: Google Maps

Land Use Designation & Applicable Plans/Guidelines

Zoning Designation: Open Space District (OS)

Comp. Plan Designation: Open Space / Controlled Development

Open Space Development

Review Criteria Yes

Context-Based Design: Not applicable

Downtown Urban Design: Not applicable

SOFA II CAP: Not applicable

Baylands Master Plan: Not applicable

ECR Guidelines ('76 / '02): Not applicable

Proximity to Residential
Uses or Districts (150'):

Not applicable

Located w/in AIA

(Airport Influence Area): Not applicable

Prior City Reviews & Action

City Council:	Variance 86-V-22, which provides a maximum impervious cover of 15,050 square feet on the subject site
PTC:	None
HRB:	None
ARB:	None

Site and Project Description

The subject site encompasses 5.42 acres (235,898 square feet) of vacant land currently covered by native grasses and oak forest. The topography varies greatly across the site, with a knoll rising near the southern front property line near the Los Trancos Road frontage. From the top of this knoll, the elevation drops over 100 feet towards the northern rear property line bordering the Arastradero Preserve. The top of knoll and most of the higher areas of the property are covered with grasses, while two large groves of live and valley oaks are located on either side of the property and in the northern, lower elevations.

The site is located in the Hewlett Tract, a subdivision encompassing ten building sites of which five have thus far been developed. According to Santa Clara County records, the houses in the subdivision range from 3,344 to 8,911 square feet in floor area, and four of the five houses contain two stories.

The applicant proposes to construct a 9,363 square foot two-story residence with a basement, as well as a 1,596 square foot detached guest house. Access to the main residence and guest house would be from a single entrance on Los Trancos Road. The main residence would be situated on the downslope, and would, to some extent, be tucked up against the hillside. The garage and two other single-floor elements totaling approximately 1,915 square feet of the gross floor area of the main residence contain green roofing systems that will support native vegetation, allowing these elements to be integrated with the post-grading contours of the hillside and lending the appearance of a subterranean structure from some vantage points. The guest house will be situated to the western side of the lot, and connected to the main residence by a dirt trail. For zoning purposes, the guest house is considered an accessory structure and use rather than a second dwelling unit due to the absence of a full kitchen with cooking facilities. As of the writing of this report, accessory dwelling units are only permitted in the Open Space District on properties in excess of 10 acres. However, it is understood that minimum lot sizes for accessory dwelling units may be subject to change in the future. The exterior siding materials include stone, plaster, and wood siding with muted colors, and the main elements of the roof would be a black standing seam metal.

Development Standards

The property is one of ten residential building sites which, in addition to two Common Areas, encompass a subdivision known as the "Hewlett Tract" ("Tract"). At the time that the Hewlett Tract tentative subdivision map was approved by City Council on August 18, 1980, the Open Space District restricted residential density to one dwelling unit for every ten acres, and

required a corresponding ten-acre minimum lot size. However, due to the slope constraints present on the land encompassing the 129-acre Tract, the allowable density of the original parcel was transferred to ten clustered building sites ranging from 3.9 to 6.0 acres. The remaining areas of the Tract were then recorded as dedicated common open space areas (owned in common by the owners of the building sites), and another portion of the Tract was dedicated to the City of Palo Alto for parkland. The current code no longer has an explicit maximum residential density in the Open Space District, but does retain the ten acre minimum lot size requirement.

When the Hewlett Tract subdivision was approved by the City Council in 1980, the most limiting development standard was a maximum impervious and building coverage standard of 3.5% of site area. As remains the case to the present, this impervious area standard included building coverage, retaining walls, patios, and other impervious areas. To incentivize the clustering concept of the Hewlett Tract, the impervious area allotments from Common Area A and the parkland dedication area were transferred to Common Area B (for a tennis court) and to the building sites. In effect, each of the ten building sites was treated as a 10 acre site for the purpose of applying the maximum allowable coverage, which was 15,246 square feet. Ordinance #3345, passed by the City Council in 1982, amended this standard to require the transfer of impervious coverage from open space-restricted areas of a “subdivision with clustered lots less than 10 acres in size” to the building sites in a proportional manner based on lot size. This code change increased the maximum impervious coverage on the subject site to 17,401 square feet. However, the original design intent with the Hewlett Subdivision had been to allocate equivalent impervious coverage across the ten building sites, and a variance was granted in 1986 to relieve the Hewlett Tract building sites from the proportional impervious requirement in favor of the equivalent impervious allocations that were originally intended. This variance thus provided the subject site with a maximum impervious coverage of 15,050 square feet, subject to revision through Site and Design Review.

In 2009, Ordinance #5062 added a maximum Floor Area Ratio (FAR) standard for single family houses proposed in the Open Space District, allowing for a floor area bonus if the majority of native vegetation on the site is retained or replaced. Gross floor area for houses in the Open Space District is calculated using the same inclusion and exclusion methods for single family residential development in the R-1 Zoning Districts.

Requested Entitlements, Findings and Purview:

The following discretionary applications are being requested and subject to PTC purview:

- Site and Design: The process for evaluating this type of application is set forth in PAMC 18.30(G). Site and design is intended to provide a review process for development in environmentally and ecologically sensitive areas, including established community areas which may be sensitive to negative aesthetic factors, excessive noise, increased traffic or other disruptions, in order to assure that use and development will be harmonious with other uses in the general vicinity, will be compatible with environmental and ecological objectives, and will be in accord with the Palo Alto Comprehensive Plan. If recommended for approval, the project is forwarded to the City Council for final action

of all requested entitlements. Site and design applications are evaluated to specific findings. All findings must be made in the affirmative to approve the project. The findings to approve a site and design application are provided in Attachment A.

Analysis¹

Views, Neighborhood Setting, and Character

The subject property is constrained by the down-sloping grade, which affords views of the Santa Clara Valley while also revealing some direct views of the site from the Arastradero Preserve, including from Meadowlark Trail. The degree of the visibility is somewhat muted by the placement of the main residence below the top of the knoll. However, story poles erected to simulate the building envelopes indicate that the main residence would be silhouetted against the sky from the perspective of the trail below. Additionally, some portions of the second story of the main house would also be visible from Los Trancos Road despite the siting of the house on the north side of the knoll.

The project design has taken into account the slope constraints and utilized many strategies for minimizing the potential visual impact by presenting a horizontal orientation to the house, tucking portions of the house into the hillside, and hiding the guest house from the northern perspective. However, the absence of tree cover in the immediate vicinity of the main house leaves it more conspicuous than others in the Hewlett Tract, which contain oak forests along the northern face of the hill that screen the houses along the ridge. This relatively barren landscape on the subject site also limits the efficacy of limiting the total house height to that of the top of the knoll, as the house appears to protrude above the ridge when viewed from below.

Commissioners are encouraged to review Attachment A, which contains the findings required to recommend approval of the project to Council.

Tree Protection

An arborist's report was prepared with the application, and provides a survey of the species, diameter, and health of the trees in the vicinity of the construction. There are twenty-eight protected live and valley oaks on the property that would form the perimeter of an extended Tree Protection Zone, which would separate the construction activities from the oak and buckeye groves. One valley oak in the center of the site is proposed for removal due to decay and its precarious location near a portion of the home. As mitigation for the removal of the valley oak, ten blue oak trees are proposed to be planted on the perimeter of the property, including six downslope from the main residence. Each of the trees is required to be 6 feet in crown diameter at the time of planting.

¹ The information provided in this section is based on analysis prepared by the report author prior to the public hearing. Planning and Transportation Commission in its review of the administrative record and based on public testimony may reach a different conclusion from that presented in this report and may choose to take an alternative action from the recommended action.

Zoning Compliance²

A detailed review of the proposed project's consistency with applicable zoning standards has been performed. A summary table is provided in Attachment B. As proposed, the project complies with all applicable codes, or is seeking through the requested permits permission to deviate from certain code standards, in a manner that is consistent with the Zoning Ordinance. The impervious cover area of 15,089 square feet shown in the project plans would exceed the amount permitted subject to Variance 86-V-22, which provides a maximum of 15,050 square feet for the site. However, it appears as though the water surface of the swimming pool has been included in the impervious calculation unnecessarily (PAMC 18.28.070(m)(6)), and therefore the project is compliant with the maximum impervious cover standard as designed.

Consistency with the Comprehensive Plan, Site and Design Findings, and Open Space Development Criteria³

The Comprehensive Plan contains Goals, Policies, and Programs for the Open Space areas of the City. The applicable Comprehensive Plan sections, including the Open Space Development Criteria, are included in Attachment A. The story poles described on the previous page indicate that the house would be visible from certain points in the Arastradero Preserve, and accordingly, staff is concerned with the project's consistency with the first Development Criterion, which seeks to minimize visual impacts. Additionally, while the project has been designed not to extend above the top of the knoll as suggested by the second Development Criterion, the second story of the house would be silhouetted against the sky when viewed from some locations in the Arastradero Preserve. These two criteria are related to the first Site and Design Review finding regarding the compatibility of uses of adjoining or nearby sites. Images of the site from various perspectives are provided in Attachment F. Additionally, it is anticipated that the applicant will provide a presentation showing the development in context to the surroundings.

Environmental Review

The subject project has been assessed in accordance with the authority and criteria contained in the California Environmental Quality Act (CEQA), the State CEQA Guidelines, and the environmental regulations of the City. Specifically, the project is categorically exempt per Section 15303 of the CEQA Guidelines, which includes but is not limited to the development of one single family residence, or a second dwelling unit in a residential zone, as well as accessory or appurtenant structures including garages, carports, patios, swimming pools, and fences. Staff finds that the development of a single family house and guest house in a residential subdivision in the Open Space, which permits single family use, is substantially similar to the examples included in Section 15303 of the CEQA Guidelines.

² The Palo Alto Zoning Code is available online: http://www.amlegal.com/codes/client/palo-alto_ca

³ The Palo Alto Comprehensive Plan is available online: <http://www.cityofpaloalto.org/gov/topics/projects/landuse/compplan.asp>

Public Notification, Outreach & Comments

The Palo Alto Municipal Code requires notice of this public hearing be published in a local paper and mailed to owners and occupants of property within 600 feet of the subject property at least ten days in advance. Notice of a public hearing for this project was published in the *Palo Alto Weekly* on December 23, 2016, which is 19 days in advance of the meeting. Postcard mailing occurred on December 20, 2016, which is 22 days in advance of the meeting.

Public Comments

As of the writing of this report, three project-related public comments were received and are included with Attachment D. Two comments expressed support for the project. A third comment expressed concerns about the impacts of the house on the views from the Arastradero Preserve from the Acorn Trail, which is situated to the northeast of the site.

Alternative Actions

In addition to the recommended action, the Planning and Transportation Commission may:

1. Direct staff to prepare a draft Record of Land Use Action recommending approval of the project based on findings that the project is consistent with the Site and Design Objectives and Open Space Development Criteria;
2. Direct staff to prepare a draft Record of Land Use Action recommending denial of the project based on findings that the project is inconsistent with the Site and Design Objectives and Open Space Development Criteria.

Report Author & Contact Information

Graham Owen, Associate Planner
(650) 329-2552
graham.owen@cityofpaloalto.org

PTC⁴ Liaison & Contact Information

Jonathan Lait, AICP, Assistant Director
(650) 329-2679
jonathan.lait@cityofpaloalto.org

⁴ Emails may be sent directly to the PTC using the following address: planning.commission@cityofpaloalto.org

Attachment A

Site and Design Review Findings

1. *The use will be constructed and operated in a manner that will be orderly, harmonious, and compatible with existing or potential uses of adjoining or nearby sites.*
2. *The project is consistent with the goal of ensuring the desirability of investment, or the conduct of business, research, or educational activities, or other authorized occupations, in the same or adjacent areas.*
3. *Sound principles of environmental design and ecological balance are observed in the project.*
4. *The use will be in accord with the Palo Alto Comprehensive Plan.*

Applicable Policies in the Comprehensive Plan

Policy L-1: *The Comprehensive Plan encourages the preservation of undeveloped land west of the Foothill Expressway and Junipero Serra as open space, with allowances made for very low-intensity development consistent with the open space character of the area.*

Policy L-5: *The Comprehensive Plan states to maintain the scale and character of the City. Avoid land uses that are overwhelming and unacceptable due to their size and scale.*

Policy L-69: *Preserve the scenic qualities of Palo Alto's roads and trails for motorists, cyclists, pedestrians, and equestrians.*

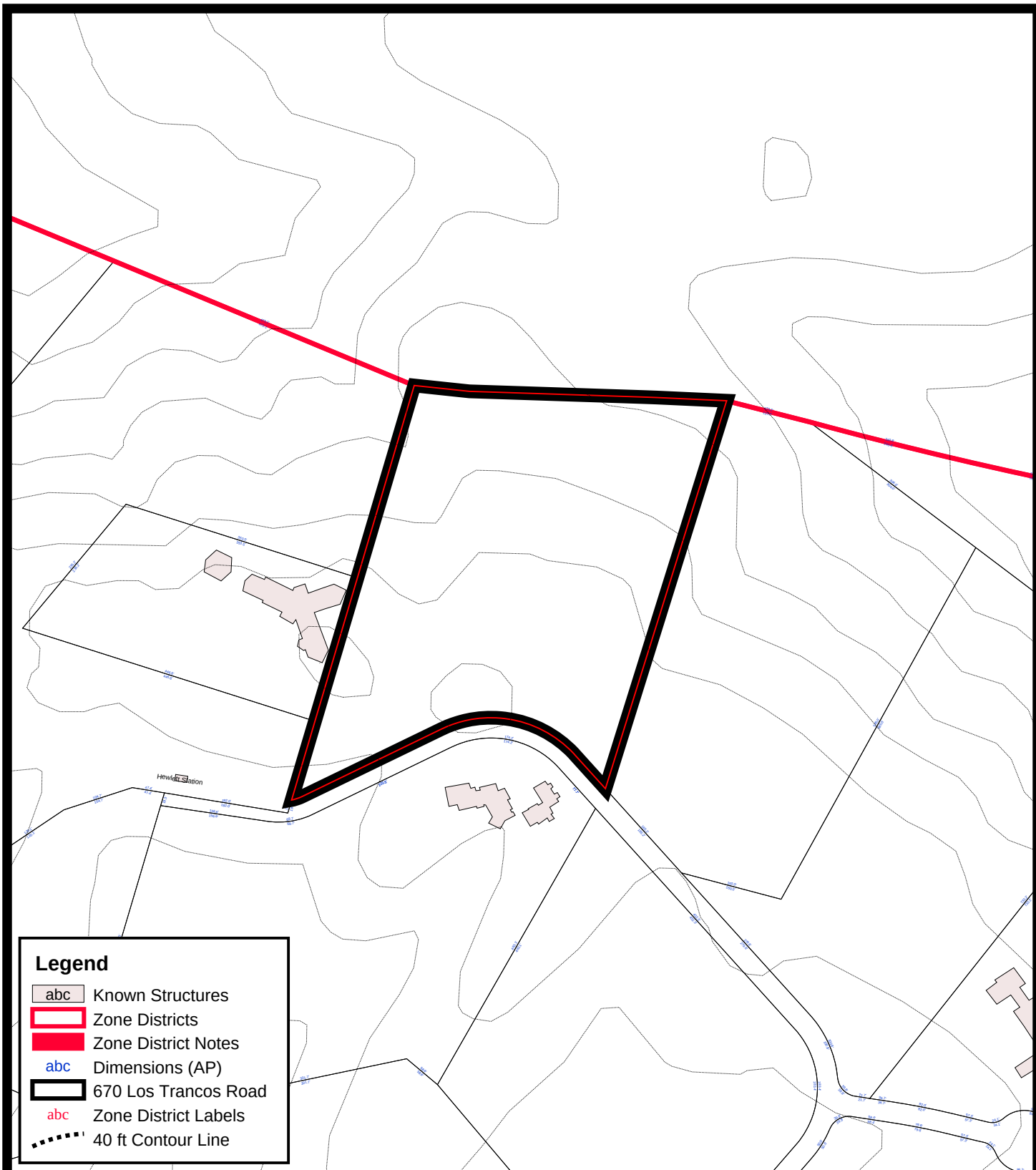
Policy N-7: *All development in the foothill portion of the Planning Area should be consistent with the City of Palo Alto Open Space development Criteria.*

Open Space Review Criteria

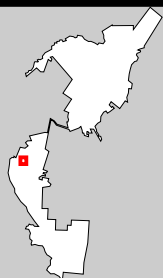
1. *The development should not be visually intrusive from public roadways and public parklands. As much as possible, development should be sited so it is hidden from view.*
2. *Development should be located away from hilltops and designed to not extend above the nearest ridgeline.*
3. *Site and structure design should take into consideration impacts on privacy and views of neighboring properties.*
4. *Development should be clustered, or closely grouped, in relation to the area surrounding it to make it less conspicuous, minimize access roads, and reduce fragmentation of natural habitats.*
5. *Built forms and landscape forms should mimic the natural topography. Building lines should follow the lines of the terrain, and trees and bushes should appear natural from a distance.*

Attachment A

6. *Existing trees with a circumference of 37.5 inches, measured 4.5 feet above the ground level, should be preserved and integrated into the site design. Existing vegetation should be retained as much as possible.*
7. *Cut is encouraged when it is necessary for geotechnical stability and to enable the development to blend into the natural topography. Fill is generally discouraged and should never be distributed within the driplines of existing trees. Locate development to minimize the need for grading.*
8. *To reduce the need for cut and fill and to reduce potential runoff, large, flat expanses of impervious surfaces should be avoided.*
9. *Buildings should use natural materials and earthtone or subdued colors.*
10. *Landscaping should be native species that require little or no irrigation. Immediately adjacent to structures, fire retardant plants should be used as a fire prevention technique.*
11. *Exterior lighting should be low-intensity and shielded from view so it is not directly visible from of-site.*
12. *Access roads should be of a rural rather than urban character. (Standard curb, gutter, and concrete sidewalk are usually inconsistent with the foothills environment).*
13. *For development in unincorporated areas, ground coverage should be in general conformance with Palo Alto's Open Space District regulations.*



The City of
Palo Alto



670 Los Trancos Road

This map is a product of the
City of Palo Alto GIS



ATTACHMENT B
ZONING COMPARISON TABLE
670 Los Trancos Road 16PLN-00266

Table 1a: COMPARISON WITH CHAPTER 18.28 (OS DISTRICT)
OS Residential Development Standards

Regulation	Required	Existing	Proposed
Minimum Site Area, Width and Depth	Area: 10 acres Width: No standard Depth: No standard	Area: 5.42 acres Width: 288 feet Depth: 628 feet	No change
Front Yard	30 feet	N/A	130 feet for main house, 62 feet for guest house
Street Side Yard	30 feet	N/A	N/A
Rear Yard	30 feet	N/A	224 feet for main house, 340 feet for guest house
Interior Side Yard	30 feet	N/A	R: 58 feet, L: 176 for main house; R: 288 feet, L: 85 feet for guest house
Max. Building Height	25 feet average height of the highest gable	N/A	25 feet average height for the highest gable
Maximum Impervious Coverage	15,050 sf (Per Variance 86-V-22)	N/A	15,089 sf (to be reduced per Conditions of Approval)
Max. Total Floor Area Ratio	4% (9,444 sf) for a 5.42 acre site, or 5% (11,804 sf) with FAR bonus	N/A	4.6% (10,862 sf) with FAR bonus
Native Vegetation Retained or Restored (for FAR bonus)	≥ 90% of site area	N/A	91.4% of site area

Table 1b: CONFORMANCE WITH CHAPTER 18.52 (Off-Street Parking and Loading)
Single Family Residential Uses (Tandem Parking Allowed)

Type	Required	Existing	Proposed
Vehicle Parking	4 spaces, of which one must be covered	N/A	4 covered spaces

From: [Allan Alcorn](#)
To: [Owen, Graham](#)
Subject: 670 Los Trancos Rd project
Date: Thursday, December 29, 2016 2:53:49 PM

Dear Sirs and Madam,

I am writing this in support of the proposed new home at 670 Los Trancos Rd. I live at 660 Los Trancos Rd directly adjacent to the proposed new home and welcome their project. The lot has been vacant as long as we have been there and we knew that some day there would be a home built on that site. We have examined the plans and are pleased that such a beautiful home is going to be built there. It is clear that significant effort was spent in making the home have as little impact as possible and will fit into the natural environment.

I am a frequent visitor to Arastradero Open Space; I walk the trails about once a week and I am very familiar with the views. Compared to the existing structures on the ridge, mine included, that can only be seen from the Martin's trail I think this building will be less visible and blend in well. Much of the structure will be hidden by trees and some of it is underground.

I support this proposal and look forward to its approval.

Sincerely,

Allan Alcorn

660 Los Trancos Rd.
Portola Valley, CA 94028

From: [H. Grousbeck](#)
To: [Planning Commission](#); [Owen, Graham](#)
Subject: Fwd: Happy Holidays!
Date: Wednesday, December 28, 2016 12:12:00 PM

----- Forwarded message -----From:

H. Grousbeck

Date: Wed, Dec 28, 2016 at 10:01 AM

Subject: Fwd: Happy Holidays!

To: "H. Grousbeck"

----- Forwarded message -----From:

H. Grousbeck

Date: Wed, Dec 28, 2016 at 9:59 AM Subject:

Fwd: Happy Holidays!

To: "H. Grousbeck"

----- Forwarded message -----From:

H. Grousbeck

Date: Wed, Dec 28, 2016 at 9:56 AM Subject:

Fwd: Happy Holidays!

To: "H. Grousbeck"

Dear Palo Alto Planning Commissioners:

As residents of Palo Alto abutting Arastradero Preserve for the last 30 years , w e have been strong advocates of Bay Area open space .
For many years I (Susanne) was a member of the POST board of directors.

It is against this background that we are writing in support of the Gechts' proposed development at 670 Los Trancos. We will be neighbors 2 lots away when (hopefully) their proposed house is completed.

Noa and Guy Gecht have engaged our entire neighborhood in their design process from the very beginning. It is clear that

t hey were determined to spend the time and r esources to come up with an organic design that minimizes the impact to the Preserve as well as to the neighborhood. We are very impressed with their thoughtfulness: most of the house is tucked into the knoll, and they placed as much of the construction as possible behind the trees. As a result the facade will be partially visible only from very small sections of the trail paths.

We respectfully encourage you to approve this responsible and considerate design.

Kind

regards,

Susanne and H. Irving Grousbeck

706 Los Trancos Road

From: [Planning Commission](#)
To: [Owen, Graham](#)
Subject: FW: Please do not allow new construction above Arastradero Preserve
Date: Tuesday, December 20, 2016 10:27:04 AM

Yolanda M. Cervantes
Planning & Community Environment
City of Palo Alto
Yolanda.cervantes@cityofpaloalto.org
650.329.2404

From: Kim Atkinson
Sent: Thursday, December 15, 2016 5:05 PM
To: Planning Commission
Cc: Dunn, Curt
Subject: Please do not allow new construction above Arastradero Preserve

Hello Palo Alto Planning Commission,

I am a lifelong resident of Palo Alto, a homeowner, taxpayer, and we have raised our children here.

We have supported the public schools, have led a Girl Scout troop, volunteered, and have been good community members.

le, we have a long-term stake in this place, and hopefully may have a voice !

We are frequent hikers at Arastradero Preserve (as well as at Foothill Park).

Recently at Arastradero, while hiking west towards the top of the hill, near a trail junction at the top of Acorn Trail, I noticed red construction marker flags higher up in the direction towards Foothill Park. Apparently a home is planned for construction there. Please see attached photos, taken from the top of Acorn Trail.

As I understand it, this planned new house construction is in the 700 block of Los Trancos Road.

I would like to oppose this new house construction. It will affect the view of the hills and of the skyline at Arastradero Preserve, when one is hiking uphill and west. A new building there will make the preserve feel more closed in, or hemmed in, whereas now it feels fairly open and natural, with a great sky view above the highest hills.

There are a few existing houses in this area, but we are used to them being tucked in low among the trees and don't notice them. They are not very visible the way this new one will be.

The preserve is already encircled by a golf course, existing homes, and has an occasionally-audible pump in it near the lake.

When we hike up there, it is our chance to "get away" from urban stressors and traffic, and to enjoy nature and wildlife and sky views.

If you allow that house to be constructed directly in our sight-line as we climb west up that hill, the natural feel of this wilderness preserve will be spoiled.

This house will serve a very privileged few, at the expense of many people who go up there to enjoy nature.

Re Palo Alto's housing shortage-- this single family dwelling will not put a dent in the problem, but will affect many park users.

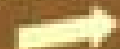
Please do not allow this construction to go forward.

Thank you for your time and attention to this letter,
Kim Atkinson
1753 Middlefield Road
Palo Alto 94301

**MEADOWLARK
TRAIL**



0.7 MI. TO
GATE C - JOHN
MARTHENS LANES



0.8 MI. TO
DE ANZA TRAIL

Trail is open from 6:00 a.m. to 6:00 p.m.







Attachment E

Project Plans

Hardcopies of project plans are provided to PTC Members. These plans are available to the public by visiting the Planning and Community Environmental Department on the 5th floor of City Hall at 250 Hamilton Avenue.

Directions to review Project plans online:

1. Go to: <https://palalto.buildingeye.com/planning>
2. Search for "670 Los Trancos Road" and open record by clicking on the green dot
3. Review the record details and open the "more details" option
4. Use the "Records Info" drop down menu and select "Attachments"
5. Open the attachment named "**12/12/2016 Project Plans**"











