



November 15, 2021

San Rafael Design Review Board
14 Fifth Avenue
San Rafael, CA 94901

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RE: 52-54 Fremont/Marquard Review

Honorable Board Members,
Sustainable San Rafael welcomes your review of the previous deliberations of the DRB Subcommittee and consideration of coast redwoods on these two parcels.

Much has changed since this project was first before you, and certainly since these two non-conforming lots were created over a century ago. Climate change has become increasingly central to all decision-making, including the role of sequestration by trees, soil, and other natural elements in reducing greenhouse gases. San Rafael's General Plan 2040 has been adopted, incorporating these new priorities.

In addition, a respiratory pandemic and 'apocalyptic orange' wildfire smoke have driven home the health benefits of the clean air provided by our natural environment. Heat waves and drought have reminded us that vegetation also cools our city and helps maintain soil moisture. And as you can see from the letters submitted to you this evening, trees in particular—especially big, iconic trees like coast redwoods—hold a lasting and growing place in the hearts of San Rafael residents.

The fact that these are non-conforming lots (in aggregate only about 75% of the size that today's code would require) means that the City must scrupulously apply current rules to achieve current values, such as preservation and enhancement of the remarkable grove of mature redwoods that graces this site.

In this case, the chief tool at your disposal is the Hillside Overlay District, which requires that sites retain a sizable area in an undisturbed 'natural state' and that trees over a foot in diameter be kept. These regulations provide an elegant means of preserving the existing redwoods, while allowing fair and reasonable development of the site.

The aggregate 'natural state' required for these two sites is 9,921 square feet. In approving the requested lot line adjustment, the City should maintain this overall requirement while allowing the deficit on the new upper lot to be made up for with an increase to the 'natural state' on the lower lot by 724 square feet, consolidated to protect the redwood grove.

This could be accomplished by somewhat reducing the footprint

of the new house on the lower lot, while reorienting its upper two floors to run perpendicular, rather than parallel to the street. The reorientation would allow the heart of the redwood grove to be retained (trees #5 – 11). Relocating the bio-retention basin at the northeast corner of the lot could preserve the remaining two threatened redwoods (trees #17 & 18). The redesign of the house in this manner might well enhance the ‘mountain cabin style’ and ‘alpine feel’ of the concept by incorporating the redwoods more fully into the design.

About half of the additional ‘natural state’ could also be achieved by potentially allowing the two guest parking spaces to utilize the *undeveloped* portion of the street right-of-way (essentially treating them as on-street parking spaces, without narrowing the traveled way). Moving the parking east in this manner would also greatly reduce the height of the associated retaining walls. More importantly, it would decrease the disturbance to the existing redwood grove, including the vitally important root zone and micorrhizal fungi community that support the nutrition and interconnectivity of the trees.

The size and longevity of redwoods make them one of our premier sequesters of carbon, with each 50-year old tree absorbing an estimated 1,402 pounds of greenhouse gas every year, while storing a total of over 15 metric tons (per the ‘itree’ website). This is a substantial contribution to San Rafael’s goal of ‘drawing down’ atmospheric carbon below greenhouse gas emission levels by 2045. We are blessed that redwoods are an original part of our community. We need to be planting many more. And we need to protect and care for those we have.

The mature existing redwoods on these two lots are already providing this critical ecological service at a rate that replacement trees will never achieve in the time needed to curb climate change, especially if replaced by much smaller trees. We therefore strongly urge that all existing redwoods on both lots be preserved, and that any replacement of other species be done with redwoods or other large native species wherever sufficient space exists on either lot.

We ask you to prevent the removal of these magnificent trees from becoming the first instance of the City’s failure to adequately implement its Hillside ordinance. Thank you for your careful consideration of this potentially precedent-setting decision.

Sincerely,

William Carney
President

Copies: Jim Schutz, Alicia Giudice, David Hogan, Leslie Mendez