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EDITORIAL

Saving Sanitas

Board's rejection of development plan was right on

The city of Boulder Planning board has earned a reputation among some citizens as an overly intrusive body willing to impose its agenda with little regard for those whose lives it affects.

As with most reputations, that's overstated. But there is a kernel of truth — at least — at its core. Charged with studying long-range planning matters, notably the Boulder Valley Comprehensive Plan and making recommendations to the City Council on applications for annexation and rezoning, the board most often arouses the ire of citizens when carrying out its role in making smaller-scale decisions on site and use-review applications.

And sometimes, this powerful board goes beyond its own job description. That's what happened recently when it proposed detailed changes to a visitor plan for open space, rather than simply evaluating how the proposal fit into the city's overall planning.

But let's face it: Boulder remains an eminently desirable place to live; not perfect, but what place is? And the work of the Planning Board over the years has helped to keep it that way.

So it was April 21 when the board wisely rejected a massive, out-of-character proposed development on the Boulder Junior Academy property at the foot of Mount Sanitas. In rejecting the proposal, the board also refused to endorse a change to zoning rules that would have facilitated the development.

The board said no to the project's first iteration in May 2004. That plan called for the construction of 26 homes on the compact, 5.8-acre hillside property, some of which would have been more than 6,000 square feet. Neighbors called the proposal an "invasion" and "debauched," and the board agreed that it was not consistent with the existing neighborhood of older, smaller homes, most

in the 600- to 2,200-square-foot range.

But the proposal rejected last week was hardly better: 42 somewhat smaller residences, including 1,200-square-foot rowhouses and 126,000 square feet of construction overall, jammed into a relatively tiny area. The board rightly judged that such a development would irreparably alter the character of the neighborhood.

The developers suggested it was in line with other, housing-dense developments encouraged by the city in recent years. But those projects are on more significant thoroughfares, not quiet little Fourth Street, and they do not abut one of the city's most popular open-space destinations.

Given all that, there was simply no sound reason to overturn existing rules and irreversibly alter the neighborhood. This is exactly the kind of thing the Planning Board should be doing: applying the rules and promoting the interests of the citizens against the grander ambitions of developers.

But board member Simon Mole also was right when he chastised neighbors for their opposition to virtually any building on the property: "If they wanted to preserve the view of a piece of property they don't own, they need to think about buying it. You haven't done that."

Exactly right. It's not "NIMBY" — not in my back yard — to ask that the city respect its own rules and protect the character of a potentially historic neighborhood, but it is naive and unfair to demand that property owners provide them with a free park.

We expect the developers will come back with another proposal. **But until they offer something appropriate for the area, we fully support the Planning Board's continued opposition. That's why we have the board, and in this case, it gets high marks.**

FRIENDS OF MT. SANITAS

May 21, 2009