

# Lessons from Lavender Court: Learning from our Mistakes

*by CVA Board member John Callender*



The Lavender Court development project on Carpinteria Avenue has been in the planning and building phases for a number of years. Now that it is almost finished, many people, including myself, are having the same reaction to it: surprise at the project's density and scale, and concern about the impact it will have on the character of our community.

Lavender Court is one of the first big projects to be completed in Carpinteria since the adoption of the city's General Plan. Before the actual process of building started, a lot of work went into making sure the project would be consistent with the city's planning goals. Story poles were erected and photographs taken. Experts on the city staff prepared reports. Public input was sought. Hearings were held by the Architectural Review Board, the Planning Commission, and the City Council. Despite these efforts, though, the actual project as built raises questions.

The city's policies state that downtown development should be kept consistent with our "small beach town" image. Planning decisions should encourage the "gradual but systematic transformation of Carpinteria Avenue from a highway commercial strip to an integrated downtown street similar in character to Linden Avenue." Where possible, mountain views should be protected. In my mind, and the minds of others I've talked to, Lavender Court could have done a better job in these areas.

I learned a lot during a recent trip to City Hall to look through the project's planning file. Concerns about potential impacts were voiced early during the approval process, and did result in some changes by the developer. Other items in the file were less reassuring. For example, I found a series of photographs, received April 12, 2004, showing the story poles that were erected on the site to help decision-makers assess Lavender Court's visual impacts. But the photographs were taken on an overcast day when low clouds blocked views of the mountains. Wouldn't it have made more sense to use photos taken on a clear day when the mountains could be seen?

A staff report presented to the Planning Commission on September 7, 2004, said the Architectural Review Board had found that there would be "no significant impacts to public views, in part given the urban and infill nature of the site. Additionally, the development would continue to provide views through the site to the mountains at driveway points." It's true that there are other

locations along Carpinteria Avenue where mountain views are blocked by buildings and trees. But it is hard to understand how the ARB could find that the replacement of the previous unbroken mountain views at the Lavender Court site with a nearly-unbroken stretch of buildings (even architecturally attractive buildings) could be described as insignificant. Similarly, the "views through the site to the mountains at driveway points" are less impressive than the report makes them sound; the few small openings mostly frame views of the second row of buildings inside the project, rather than of mountains.

Another staff report delivered to the City Council on November 8, 2004, echoed the language from the earlier report to the Planning Commission. "In the general neighborhood, views to the mountains are currently limited due to existing surrounding development. The proposed project is essentially infill development, at a similar scale to some of the existing neighboring buildings in terms of height and lot coverage." Armed with these findings, the City Council issued a "mitigated negative declaration," certifying under state law that the Lavender Court project would have no negative impacts on public viewsheds.

With the benefit of hindsight, I think our representatives on the City Council got that wrong. How did that happen? One factor was the city's desire to meet its state housing mandates, and to do so using high-density housing in the city center, rather than giving up open space elsewhere and succumbing to "sprawl". Another factor was the desire to replace the buildings and parking lot at the old site, which admittedly were unattractive, with something more in keeping with the community's vision for downtown.

Given those desires, both the community and the city government had reasons to want to be "sold" on the project, and the developer did a good job of selling it to us. The painted rendering of the project, currently visible at [www.lavendercourt.com](http://www.lavendercourt.com) and in ads running in the Coastal View, is beautiful. It shows a block of attractive buildings that merge gracefully into the mountains visible behind them. Unfortunately, the actual project doesn't look like that, at least not from any location from which it can be viewed today. As near as I can tell, the painting represents the point of view of someone standing well south of Carpinteria Avenue. Viewed from the street (that is, viewed from the location where Carpinteria visitors and residents will actually be viewing it), Lavender Court is much more imposing, and the mountain views are gone.

I don't fault the Lavender Court developer for being a good salesman, and portraying his project in the best light. Nor do I fault him for wanting to maximize his return on investment by building as large a project as the city would let him build. The fault lies more with people like me, who were too busy with other concerns at the time the project was being approved to encourage an appropriate degree of *caveat emptor* on the part of the city.

Hindsight is 20/20, but for better or worse, Lavender Court is now a part of Carpinteria's downtown character. If I had my way, what would happen now?

One thing I would like to see is for all of us – private citizens, the City Council, the Planning Commission, and the Architectural Review Board -- to do a careful *post mortem* of the Lavender Court project, in particular of its scale and visual impacts. Go drive by the project, or better yet, get out of your car and take a stroll down the 4600 block of Carpinteria Avenue. Is the project as actually built consistent with the way we'd like our city to look? Was the prediction that it would be generally of the same character as neighboring developments, and would have no negative impact on public viewsheds, accurate? Lavender Court will be cited as an example by future projects. If we don't want it to serve as the new baseline, then we need to make that clear.

If the conclusion we reach is that Lavender Court does have problems, then a second thing I would ask is that we take a careful look at the planning and approval process to see how it could be improved. Maybe it would help to have a broader range of viewpoints represented on the Architectural Review Board. Maybe we should require staff reports to include more detail when

arguing that a project will not have negative impacts. Maybe we should consider stricter limits on things like building height, setbacks, and density.

Finally, and most importantly, I intend to pay more attention to projects early on in the planning process, and I encourage other Carpinterians to do the same. It is human nature to notice problems after it is too late to do anything about them, but we need to put in the time and effort early, when our input can still do some good. We also need to keep our eye on the ball throughout the entire process. If we fail to do so, we will be living with the consequences for many years to come. ❖

