

Cooper Park development proposal raises concerns

Community responds to potential teacher housing built on park land

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A report detailing potential high-density housing developments primarily for Mountain View Whisman School District employees struggling to afford housing has met with ire from nearby residents, who have launched a campaign to oppose selling the 9.5-acre district-owned portion of Cooper Park to developers.

The document offers a number of potential courses of action, the most prominent of which recommends developing a combination of market-rate single-family housing and a subsidized district employee apartment complex on the entirety of the district-owned portion of the park. The total count of apartment units would be 82, and there would be 36 single-family homes.

Residents of Waverly Park, the neighborhood surrounding the Cooper site, have expressed their qualms about the proposal. MVHS parent Ravi Srivastava and former social studies teacher Rick Voytek collaborated with other community members to create SaveCooperPark.org, a website whose name can be seen on yard signs throughout Mountain View.

The website presents a number of arguments against the potential development and encourages visitors to contact city officials in opposition to the Cooper Park housing proposal.

Many community members, including Srivastava and Voytek, have expressed concerns about a potential development's effect on the quiet residential neighborhood.

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Michael Rafter

"I think every neighborhood has a certain character to it," Srivastava said. "That's why zoning laws exist, so that you can't just build whatever you want on any lot."

Mountain View city zoning laws, which govern the types of buildings that can be constructed in certain areas, designate Waverly Park as exclusively for single-family residential housing. A zoning change would be required to permit the construction of high-density housing at the Cooper site, a move Voytek said would prove detrimental to the Waverly Park neighborhood.

"You step through the neighborhood and it's like, 'Wow, you can actually walk down the street,'" Voytek said. "You know your neighbors. You don't get that at apartment complexes in those heavy residential areas with high density."

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Srivastava expressed empathy for teachers struggling to find housing, but he said that potential solutions should not involve development on district-owned real estate. Such projects, he said, would limit future options for the district in constructing additional school facilities.

"While these may solve some shorter-term problems, we are setting the stage for a longer-term issue, and that just doesn't feel a responsible

thing to do," Srivastava said.

School district officials, however, hold that high-density employee housing remains a possibility worth considering. According to the report's introduction, Mountain View's high cost of living forces teachers to allocate excessive portions of their household income to housing or live elsewhere and commute to work.

"It's important that MVWSD explore programs and options to retain teachers; one of those being the possibility of staff housing," district public information officer Shelly Hausman said in a statement to the Oracle.

Hausman added that media coverage and community reactions suggested imminent development at Cooper Park, but no such plan currently exists.

"Staff housing is actually years away and is still very much in the study phase," Hausman said.

Chief Strategy Officer Dominic Dutra of DCG Strategies, the consulting firm that produced the report, echoed that sentiment, declining an interview request and saying that the potential project was in the "very beginnings of an exploratory stage."

Despite his objections to the proposal, Srivastava said he does not intend to act in opposition to the district, only to contribute to a solution in the long-term interests of the district and its residents.

"At the end of the day, I believe, at least, that we have a capable school board and a city council that will come up with the right solutions," Srivastava said. "What we're doing is saying that there are alternatives and trying to list those out as best as possible."

In her statement, Hausman assured community members that steps toward development would not proceed without taking their concerns into consideration.