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OAKLAND

Dispute over flower: habitat vs. housing

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The Oakland Planning Commission could give final approval Wednesday to a housing development that will reduce the habitat of an endangered flower known to exist only in a small section of the Oakland hills and an even-smaller area of San Francisco's Presidio.

The four-home development on a steep 1.3-acre hillside on Crestmont Drive and Westfield Way was originally approved in January, over the protests of environmentalists and neighbors.

The Planning Commission agreed to hear an appeal, after environmental groups said the city's initial development approval ignored previous agreements to limit damage to the habitat of *Presidio clarkia*.

The small, lavender annual is protected under state and federal law.

"It's really the last chance for this plant," said Ralph Kanz, an Oakland resident working with the Center for Biological Diversity and the California Native Plant Society to stop the development. "The city ignored its own history, its own policies as well as established state and federal law in approving this project."

The city's development director did not return calls Monday.

In response to criticisms from environmentalists, the city forced the developer, Andalucia Properties, to scale down the project from five homes to four, and to leave two-thirds of the site -- less than an acre -- undeveloped.

"This project is the best thing that ever happened to the (plant) on this site," said Andalucia's owner and manager, Dennis Jon Woodruff. "This habitat preserve is being created with my land and with an endowment out of my pocket. I am giving up a buildable lot worth \$400,000. This will benefit the species."

Presidio clarkia is a delicate native flower that grows only two places in the world -- on rocky serpentine soils in the Presidio of San Francisco and the Oakland hills. The spindly blossoms, which are now blooming, were discovered in a 2-acre Presidio hillside in 1956. In 1988, the plant was discovered in three small areas of Alameda County near Redwood Road and Skyline Boulevard during an expansion of the Oakland Hills Tennis Club.

Under an agreement with the club, the city said it would create a management plan for the species but never did, according to critics. The result, they say, was that in the 1990s several smaller development projects were approved along Redwood Road or Crestmont Way that further reduced the habitat.

Environmentalists see the city's approval of the development as part of a larger problem in that the city, dating back to the 1991 East Bay hills fire. They say the city has been too quick to approve developments on the hillsides.

"The process for planning the use of the land does not protect the species -- the process is flawed," said Laura Baker of the California Native Plant Society. "The planning is done on a project-by-project basis. But the population of the clarkia is distributed throughout an area of the Oakland hills that is owned by different property owners. This never should have happened but the city has never dedicated itself to protecting this treasure that belongs to the city."

Woodruff said that he agreed to adopt a habitat conservation plan based on research by the U.S Fish and Wildlife Service. He said he will get rid of nonnative plants that threaten the flower in the area and then reseed it with clarkia in perpetuity.

Presidio clarkia is also the subject of efforts to preserve its last remaining habitat in nearby Redwood Regional Park on the other side of Skyline Boulevard. The park district is restricting hikers, bikers and dog-walkers in an area.

A few blocks from the proposed development, the East Bay Regional Park plans to fence off a special area from hikers and bikers to protect the endangered plant, which is also known by the scientific name *Clarkia franciscana*. In the Presidio, environmentalists are also working to protect the species.

Supporters of the project said that the Woodruff's compromise is generous although maybe not perfect.

"I've been mediating this project for several years and I think this is good compromise," Oakland City Councilwoman Jean Quan said. "It's not perfect but it's better than it was. I think it's a pretty good conservation plan."

Online resources

For more information on the plant and the Planning Commission agenda:

links.sfgate.com/ZGH

links.sfgate.com/ZGI

links.sfgate.com/ZGJ

www.cnps.org

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