

## Beckstrom Architecture+ Interiors

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November 15, 2023

**PROJECT PLANNER:** Savannah Van Akin

Town of Los Gatos - Planning Department

110 E. Main Street, Los Gatos CA 95031

**16510 Topping Way, Architecture and Site Application S-23-016**

### CDG - Neighbor Context Review

#### **Background Overview**

We appreciate the input and opinions shared in the report from the consulting Architect whose firm seems primarily focused on Commercial projects which are different to the Los Gatos Village Residential fabric. We also appreciate the effort to try to find neighborhood themes or 'cues' in the CDG report. However, the report only examines only 5 houses, half of which are likely to be demolished and rebuilt in the near future for reasons described below.

This current methodology used for neighborhood 'compatibility' ironically would have prevented construction of the historic Los Gatos core back in 1880's which was dense, vertical and had strong street wall/frontages. Fortunately, Los Gatos has a very rich and varied tapestry of its built environment and does not suffer from mass, 'suburbanization' such as other communities such as Saratoga, Los Altos, etc. It is not an accident that Los Gatos historic, dense neighborhoods are also the region 'draw' for Halloween revelers. This type of positive, civic activity is not possible in less dense suburbs. In the past decades there is a strong 'New Urbanism' and dense village approach to rectify the 'emptiness' that typical suburbs suffer. Urban Designers and Architects have pivoted to relearn the lessons of density, character and 'street wall'. This Village Urbanization pattern/tapestry is ironically a major 'draw' to Los Gatos and other communities which actually have an 'identity and sense of place'.

This response attempts to examine and reveal the 'real' existing neighborhood context and the 'anticipated' effect of the proposed design on this Los Gatos area. The Applicant/Architect believes the proposed design is very '**compatible**' with the 'neighborhood' and appropriate in Los Gatos based on a thorough examination of the development history of Los Gatos revealed in the applicant's other reports which have been submitted and based on the Urban Design background of the applicant (see resume, etc.).

The Applicant/Architect lives in the historic Loma Alta neighborhood in a new 2-story home a few minutes away from the subject site. We went through the same process. The cul-de-sac neighbors are also post World War 2 tract homes, which contrast to the nearby Loma Alta house fabric which is denser, more vertical and closer to the street which is positive and more friendly.

The Architect is writing a longer report here due to concerns on how these 'Architect' review reports can adversely affect the quality and nature of new and rebuilt housing stock in Los Gatos. The Planners of Los Gatos rely on these reports to garner a better 'Architectural' understand of submissions, yet perhaps more Village Fabric context and understanding would help the process?

The Topping Way Client selected the Architect based on the Architect's recently designed 2-story home 3 minutes away on Englewood Avenue during one of their neighborhood walks. This site also had a post War low-quality structure.



16497 Englewood Avenue, 3 min walk away



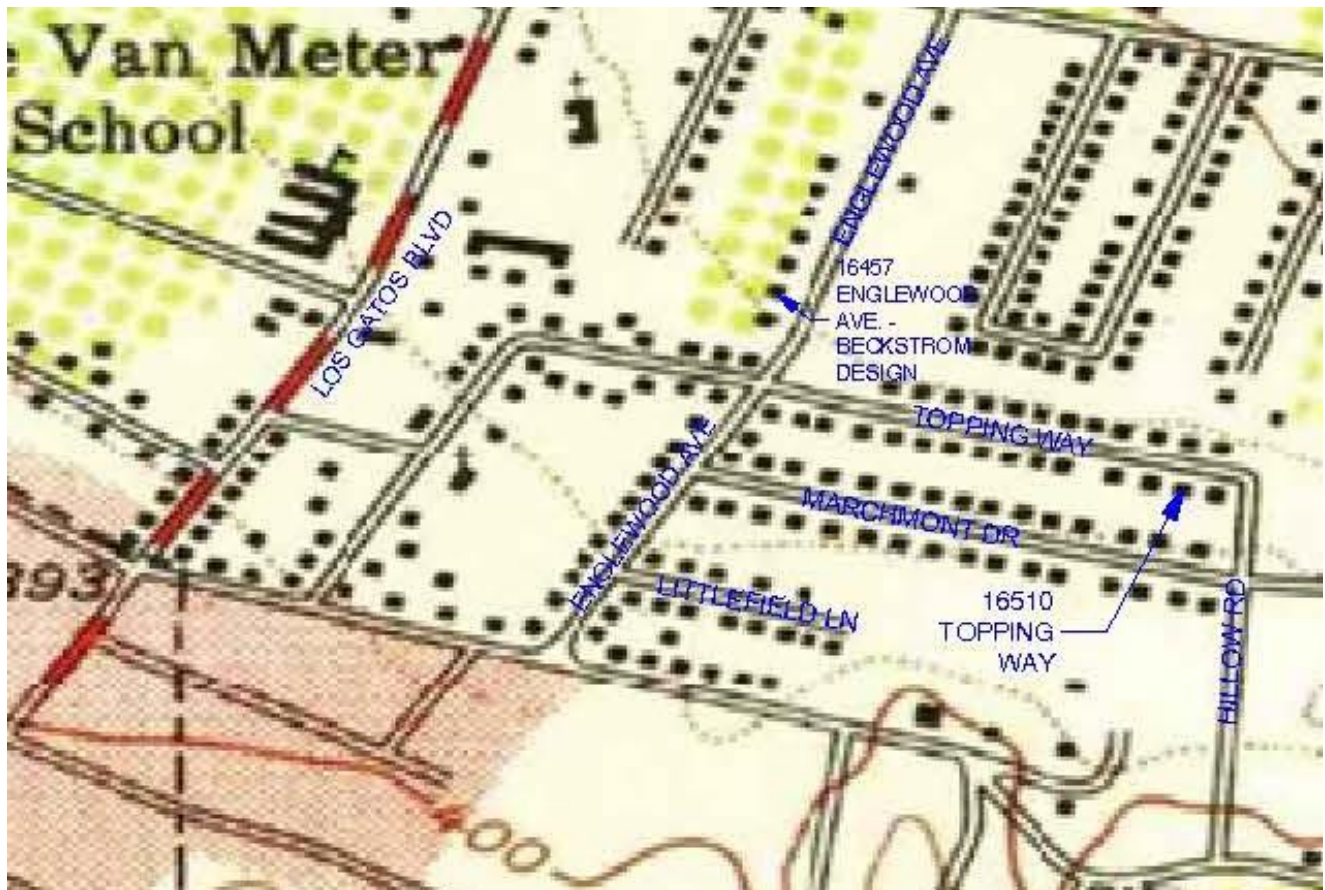
### 16510 Topping Way Site

This coastal highland plateau was used first as Tribal lands, then Spanish/Mexican ranch/grazing land. Later converted to orchards, post Gold Rush; then post World War 2 it was platted with low/medium quality paved streets, ie. without curbs & sidewalks. The GI Bill made possible the construction and home ownership of extremely low-cost/low quality 1-story housing of 1200-1800 sf in this neighborhood as seen in maps below.



1956 MAP





1973 MAP OF NEIGHBORHOOD: SUBJECT PROPERTY AND OTHER BECKSTROM DESIGN HOUSE ON ENGLEWOOD AVE; STREET/LOTS CONSTRUCTED IN 1940'S ON ORCHARDS, 1-STORY 'GI' HOUSES

### **Neighborhood Economic History and Current Economic Forces**

The 1940's site is located in a transitioning neighborhood of simple, 1-story, poor to medium quality homes built after World War II when the GI bill made first time home ownership a possibility for the middle class with low interest loans - this was a new phenomenon. This existing housing stock is marginal quality in design and construction compared to the 'heart' of Los Gatos. The houses were built quickly without insulation and low to minimal durability. The lack of **permanence** is apparent from direct observation and from the extremely low tax basis of existing homes with a real estate tax 'burden' of **\$2-3K** whereas a new house burden is **\$35-50K+!**

The neighborhood has been in rapid transition since the Silicon Valley tech boom starting in the 80's (and earlier). Today the value these small lots and marginal houses is \$2-3M! The post 1980's Silicon Valley sky rocketing wealth creation and red hot intense housing demand made these low quality/low design houses into rental gold mines fetching \$7-10K/month for a tiny house that originally cost \$20-40K to buy. These structures can bring in \$120k/year rental with only \$2K in taxes making an owner over **\$100K** in annual passive income on non-insulated houses that in houses that in the rest of the country would be worth \$200K at best...

The existing housing stock profit potential shown above is enormous and is a **deterrence** to home rental improvements which is plainly evident on adjacent and nearby lots. If the ownership remains in the family there is little financial incentive for owner improvements and the resultant property tax savings are in the hundreds of thousands of dollars.

### **Construction/Permitting - Financial Context**

The current applicants bought this lot for \$2m with a 'tear down' house which has no value now that the real estate taxes adjusted up. Neighbors to the North and the back are extremely worn rental houses that will obviously be torn down once they are sold and will make the original owners into instant millionaires. There is a lack of existing 'historic' or high quality housing stock on the Englewood Ave to Hillow Rd Neighborhood.

A new owner such as the current applicant pays \$2-3M for the privilege of demolishing one of these minimally constructed houses. They now have a heavy real estate tax burden. The new owner is under enormous financial and emotional pressure to rebuild as fast as possible. Construction costs are \$2M-3M for a new house with a total outlay of \$4.5-\$6M! They will need to set aside \$120-300K rent just to keep their children in the same school district while they go through the rebuilding process which can take 2.5 – 4 years.

The new home investment is **unlivable** for 2.5 – 4 years through the design/permitting and construction process. It is a tall order unlike any other neighborhood outside of Silicon Valley in the USA. The Architect just finished this process on their new 2-story house nearby in Loma Alta. It is not small task in any way. It is a privilege to live in Los Gatos yet it takes a marathon will.

### **Neighborhood Analysis**

about has a high is markedly different from the typical Los Gatos/USA historic, fairly high quality, high density urban village housing the low density of the 40's development is reflective of the very low value/cost of land back then. typical all across the USA. quality paved streets post 'GI Bill' affordable/low cost housing neighborhood when the streets were laid down right after World War 2, There are no sidewalks or curbs. The houses were simple one story 'ranchbuThe site is located in a larger neighborhood in transition. This transitional nature is explicit by walking or driving the neighborhood defined by: Englewood Ave., Topping Way, Marchmont Drive, Hillow Road, Cardinal/Littlefield Lanes and Kennedy Road.

**A more relevant neighborhood context is defined by:** Englewood Ave. to Hillow Road with the cross streets, Topping Way, Marchmont Drive and Cardinal/Littlefield Lane.

#### **2.3.1 2-story houses in neighborhoods**

The context information above reveals the low quality of the existing neighborhood houses. These were low quality/low design, minimal houses when built and many have been altered to mixed effect. If one does a leisurely dog walk around the neighborhood, one will see a profusion of new 2-story houses with a wide variety of form and style which matches the rich texture of Los Gatos. The proposed design is much smaller than many of the nearby houses. The proposed design is handsome and presents a friendly, neighborhood face that respects the rich history of Los Gatos Village fabric.

#### **2.3.2 Height/Bulk and setbacks**

The proposed design is 'compatible' with other Topping Way houses, seen below. Many houses are on the front setback and wider than the proposed design. They 'hold' the street and



create a lovely and safe sense of place. These other houses are not ‘bad’ because they are taller, wider or have a stronger street presence. Contrary to that, it is the ‘heart’ and draw of Los Gatos neighborhoods. The proposed design will blend in the rich tapestry and be a welcoming house for the owner’s children’s friends to visit. **This is the top requests from our client’s with young families!** They want a house that says welcome to all their children’s friends and that is easily seen from the street.



16608 Topping Way



16622 Topping Way



16566 Topping Way



16555 Topping Way

Below are less than desirable ‘street’ presences and form vocabulary



16571 Topping Way



16700 Topping Way

## 2. Trim

The two sets of windows shown on the right side inadvertently had the 3D trim layer turned off. The revised plans show the trim as planned.

## CDG Recommendations and Responses

*1. Utilize a shed roof on the front and rear instead of gable roofs.*

The proposed design is totally 'compatible' with gable roofs on the front and back. The sketches showing the proposed shed roofs 'dumbs' down the design and is unnecessary. It makes the house look 'ugly' and there is no benefit to the public from this suggestion. The design already makes use of shed dormers on the front and back to add character. The front has a central gable which is only 19' wide and is handsome and befitting of a Los Gatos house. The rear gable is 15'-6" wide and adds needed scale and variety. One only has to become familiar with the neighborhood on a short walk on Topping Way and the other streets to see that many houses have gables, many are on the front setback, etc. Los Gatos has a rich form vocabulary in the entire city and also within the neighborhood of: Englewood Ave. to Hillow Road with the cross streets, Topping Way, Marchmont Drive and Cardinal/Littlefield Lane.

*2. Provide consistent trim per 3.7.4*

The proposed design has handsome trim throughout. Unfortunately the first submission plans had a CAD layer turned off for 2 sets of windows on the right front. This layer is now turned back on-apologies.

*Further City-wide comment: Trim consistency is not a 'binary – yes or no' approach on a single house in the rich history of Residential Architectural Design and in the History of Architecture. This Architect has designed scores of houses from 1,500sf to 17,000 sf in all types of settings. Some designs have different trim on the same house, such as Shingle Style houses, etc. One can travel the globe and see handsome designs with all types of trim/form vocabulary.*

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May 16, 2024

**PROJECT PLANNER:** Sean Mullin

Town of Los Gatos - Planning Department

110 E. Main Street, Los Gatos CA 95031

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### Final Outline

Background: The Architect has had many meetings and conferences with the City to address an question which affects .04% of the house mass. The Architect responded in a timely and thorough manner, in effect writing White Papers on the development history of Los Gatos all in support of the design of this one single family residence. Several years ago, the Architect designed a neighboring house, 16457 Englewood Ave. This house inspired the current owners and they wished to emulate a similar design. The Architect worked closely with the entire family for nearly 2 years to fine tune the design including the incredible, helpful input of their 12 year old daughter who has Architectural sensibilities and perceptions beyond most adults and professionals.

1. The Los Gatos Consulting Architect report states:

***'The proposed house is very well designed in a traditional architectural style and with details that are consistent with the style and the diversity of this neighborhood. There are only a few issues related to the Town's Residential Design Guidelines.'***

- A. Issue #1 – The Consulting Architect wants to redesign the house front with a solid shed dormer which he sketches in the report. The front gable area is approx. .04% of the total house mass and totally affects the design integrity.
  - a. Response - The Architect lowered the entire house by 1'-3" by lowering the roof pitch.
  - b. It makes no design sense to add the shed dormer idea of the Consulting Architect as the front of the house **already has** a shed dormer, the reason for the gable is to break up this shed form and the gable is totally consistent with other neighboring houses. It is what would have been built 100 years ago which is self-evident.
- B. Issue #2 – (4) windows on the front were missing trim due to a CAD issue.
  - a. Response - This trim is included on Rev #1. The other areas he says need trim already have trim.

Conclusion:

This house design is totally consistent with the neighborhood as seen in A1.7, A1.8, etc. Our goal is to design houses that look like they have always been there. This neighborhood will actually benefit from more 'Village' houses as opposed to the extremely low quality 1-story houses which were built right after World War 2, many without insulation, proper wiring, etc. They are literally the cheapest structures one could build at the time. This Architect builds too, so speaking from a building science/structural perspective.

Please call or email with any follow up questions. Thanks

Sincerely,



Eric A. Beckstrom

Architect



Form Evolution over time, narrative only. This is how American housing transformed over time.

