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ASSOCIATES

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San Mateo County Planning Commission  
c/o The County of San Mateo – Planning Department  
455 County Center, Second Floor  
Redwood City, CA 94063

**Letter to San Mateo County Planning Commission**  
**Re: Ascension Heights Subdivision – Landscape Plans**

Dear San Mateo County Planning Commission,

This letter will serve as an introduction to the Landscape Construction Planting Plans prepared by our office Robert Mowat Associates. Our Landscape Architecture and Land Planning firm have been in existence since 1982 and have designed landscapes for over 25,000 production homes and 100 parks. The Ascension Heights project is one with unique site opportunities and constraints. We are preparing this letter to illustrate a few of the unique existing site conditions that dictated the final landscape planting design.

In late August 2018, our firm was hired to prepare Construction Planting Plans based roughly on the Preliminary Sketch "D" prepared by GLS Landscape on May 30, 2018. We received the previous sketch along with civil engineering drawings and additional written correspondence to help with our background research. Several site visits were made by our office to observe the existing site conditions. Our principal, Robert Mowat has long and deep understanding of the San Mateo built landscape, natural environment and the surrounding ecosystems. Robert Mowat ASLA was born, raised and educated in the city of San Mateo and returned to the peninsula following graduate studies to begin his practice of landscape architecture.

Following our in depth review of the existing research material, plans and correspondence, we began our Planting Plan design. Our initial Planting Plan design at 85% completion was discussed in an informal consultation on September 5, 2018 with the land owner and County staff to solicit feedback on our planting proposal. Following this informal meeting and review, several topics of conversation several landscape design issues arose that require further explanation on the preparation of our landscape design for the project site.

They are as follows: 1). Challenges and constraints for trail construction on the steep south slope; 2). Challenges and constraints for planting on the steep south slope; 3). Suggestion scenarios for landscape improvements in the 30'-0', no structures setback zone. We will explain our professional recommendations and rationale for the landscape design as currently prepared.

### **1. Trail Construction**

On the GLS plan Preliminary Sketch "D", a diagrammatic trail is drawn on the steep south slope. Our professional experience has shown that trail construction under these specific site conditions to be extremely problematic for the following reasons.

The existing south slope in its' existing condition presents an extremely sensitive soil and geological constraint for the construction of any trail on its slope. As clearly demonstrated in the Geotechnical Report, the steep south slope has experienced numerous soil slippages and soil erosion events in its past history. The Geotech Report clearly shows a soft top layer overlaying a harder sub-pan layer which is susceptible to future movement.

The existing steep angles of 1.6 to 1 and 1.9 to 1 on the south slope are too steep for any construction crew to safely install a trail without being roped and harnessed in for their safety. The slope as currently existing is not walkable, nor climbable without climbing aides.

We believe in our professional experience, the potential for future erosion and slippage is increased based upon the installation of any cut or fill bench grading for a trail; especially one that would be required to be 6'-0' wide. In addition, the difficulty in constructing any future trail would be extremely difficult for any maintenance crew to continually repair future erosion and slippage on the trail sides with these steep conditions.

The trail as conceptualized in the Preliminary Landscape Plan by GLS Associates also has potential for conflict between future private homeowners and public trail users. We believe there will be private/public conflicts where County involvement will become necessary.

We recommend that the trail as currently designed and located by the civil engineers on plans dated 5-2-18, adjacent to the existing water tanks provides the best opportunity for success in providing public trail access on this site. This location is as shown on the civil engineering drawings and copied onto our Landscape Planting Plans. This trail location as shown by the civil engineers provides a myriad of views and topography locations that can potentially support a 6' wide trail with 10' wide lookouts. The ability to maintain a trail in this location is greatly increased. We also believe and recommend that locating the public trail adjacent to the SFWD property alleviates potential homeowner/public conflicts in the future.

## **2. Planting of the South Slope**

As illustrated in #1 Trail Construction above, the same site conditions present themselves as potentially dangerous conditions for the future planting of landscape plant materials on the steep south slope. The Ascension Heights streetscapes/common spaces have been designed with California native plant materials per the Preliminary Sketch "D" plan by GLS. However, the installation of plant materials on the steep south slope is extremely problematic. The augering of holes to accept trees, shrubs and ground covers presents the opportunity for future soil erosion and slippage. Especially, where new soft permeable planting pits are surrounded by a dense impermeable hardpan. The ability for each hole to accumulate heavy loads of standing water (62.3 lbs/cu.ft.) will increase the likelihood of soil erosion/slippage at each plant pit. The potential for several plant pits to fill with water and slip simultaneously cannot be ruled out.

Depending on the final irrigation design, any trenching in the south slope is strongly discouraged. It is our professional experience that any irrigation excavation on steep slopes and especially those that have experienced soil slippage such as these, have great potential for further erosion and slippage. We recommend that the absence of irrigation on the extremely steep portions of the south slope is a prudent and safe recommendation.

We have prepared a recommendation of fall planting of native Oak acorns from the site be planted on the far upper reaches of the south slope. The future viability on the acorn planting of native Oaks should take place in very late fall, so that natural rainfall will germinate the acorns where they will grow and thrive as an intended natural ecosystem. Future thinning of the native Oaks may be necessary if many or all of the acorns germinate and thrive.

As discussed in #1 Trail Construction above, the same constraints for plant installation and maintenance presents itself. The maintenance of plant materials is more frequent and intensive than a trail and the likelihood for future erosion and slippage is increased significantly.

In addition to the logistical aspects of slope stability with planting, we also recommend that any future planting be respectful of the potential for wildfires. Adding fuel load upon the steep south slope is not a prudent landscape solution. While some Oaks planted via our Oak acorn planting technique recommendation will modestly add fuel, keeping the south slope to existing grasses and Oaks without adding further fuel load will help future fire fighters more quickly contain fires racing up the hillside. The south hillside presents a difficult fire fighting scenario since afternoon northwesterly winds are common and prevalent more than half the year. Our current landscape plan demonstrates that fire prevention strategies are utilized and further fuel load and landscape obstacles are avoided.

In conclusion, it is our professional experience and recommendation that planting the steep south slope sections is an imprudent and potentially dangerous solution to undertake and complete.

### **3. Screening on Lots 1-7**

Tree and shrub (where appropriate) screening has been included on the Planting Plans for Lots 1 thru 7. The screening on these Lots have been added per the specific recommendations of the Tree Report as prepared by Arborwell (Sam Oakley–Dated 10-26-18). The screen planting trees have been located as far from the tree trunks as possible on Lots 1-3. Lots 4 and 5 have traditional tree and shrub screening layouts. Lot 6 has tree and shrub screening outside the drip zone and TPZ of nearby Cypress trees. Lot 7 has minimal additional tree screening adjacent to an existing tree.

### **4. Lots 2 - 6 Landscape Improvement Scenarios for Rear Yards.**

The label of a “no structure zone” during a Planning Commission meeting without specific definition of “structure” per County codes does not preclude the use of any private outdoor living space by future homeowners. We believe that the most prudent recommendation is to outline possible outdoor use and improvements and the prohibited use and improvements in these rear yards on Lots 2 thru 6.

The current structure setback lines for structures and existing retaining wall create site conditions where no private rear space is available for the outdoor use and enjoyment entitled to all single family homeowners in the neighborhood. With the lacking of a formal County definition of “landscape structure” and the adoption of the more restrictive 30'-0" No

Structure setback zone, the possibility of future homeowners installing landscape improvements escapes guidance.

We recommend that the following verbiage be adopted into the CCRs as direction for future landscape improvements should they possibly be installed in the rear yards on Lots 2 thru 6.

Landscape Improvement Inclusions:

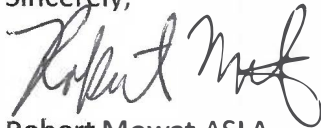
1. Planting and Irrigation. Irrigation installations to follow tree report guidelines.
2. On-grade flagstone, concrete patios and/or wood decks.
3. Landscape elements no larger than 5' wide x 5' tall. I.e. fountains, pilasters, seating, decorative landscape elements.
4. Movable and non attached/anchored landscape furniture.
5. 12 Volt lighting.

Landscape Improvement Exclusions:

1. Storage sheds, any covered building, arbors, trellises (greater than 3'-0" wide), and
2. Any structure as defined by San Mateo County Codes as a "Structure".
3. Retaining walls greater than 24" tall.
4. Any and all landscape improvements that will affect any existing Cypress tree root greater than 2' in diameter.
5. Any attachment to an existing Cypress tree.

Thank you for your interest and efforts on this project and its benefits to the neighborhood and County.

Sincerely,



Robert Mowat ASLA  
Registered LA #2258

RJM/mtf

Cc: Mr. Dennis Thomas-San Mateo Real Estate