

KEN GARCIA *The voice of The City*

Crestmont Hills project a textbook San Francisco story

People who watch the way development takes place in San Francisco could view the history of a project near Sutro Tower to try to understand why neighbors so often feel they're living on a slippery slope.

Residents in and around Crestmont Hills were aghast three years ago when they were alerted of plans by a developer to build 34 three- and four-bedroom luxury condominiums on a 50,000-square-foot parcel. The homeowners in the area near UC San Francisco expressed concerns about the density of the project for an area that is one of the most heavily wooded and quiet neighborhoods in The City.

And as property owners whose homes are partially built on pylons can attest, the site is also located on one of the steepest hillsides in The City — and therefore prone to periodic landslides. That was just one of the issues raised by the prospect of a developer cutting into the mountainside — and a key factor in why neighbors immediately mobilized and gathered political support in fighting the size and scope of the project.

The nearly universal community opposition to the proposed development didn't seem to deter the developers, but the planning process did. With the aid of district Supervisor Sean Elsbernd, the neighbors (who, for full disclosure, recently included me) were able to prove the need for a full environmental impact report on the project, which delayed building plans for a few years. Then the developers' partnership faltered

and they were unable to pay property taxes and the fees for the EIR, which had most people involved believing that the townhouse plan was essentially dead.

But in the last few weeks, the project has been revived. And all those hundreds of signs in windows throughout the neighborhood opposing the development will now remain until the battle is finished.

"It's always been a bit of a David-and-Goliath thing in which we so far have been able to hold them back," said Paul Gorman, former president of the Mt. Sutro Woods Owners Association. "But I guess we got a bit cocky because we just never thought it would be built."

In April, a trustee sale was held for the property and one of the original project developers, Magomedov, purchased it for \$1.3 million — a transaction that is being contested by his former part-

ner Alex Novell. Attempts to reach Magomedov were unsuccessful and Novell told me he couldn't talk to me until he had contacted his lawyer. But according to neighborhood coalition members following the project, Magomedov has resubmitted the initial plans for the development and it is now moving forward at the Planning Department.

"At this point, we're just waiting for the other shoe to drop," said Dr. Sam Sobol, a retired UCSF cardiologist who is now leading the community fight to block the development. "We've done our best to either bring this project to a screeching halt or move something forward that would be more amenable to the neighborhood."

"Screeching halt" may be an apt term here because that would be the sound of the brakes on any construction vehicles that try to maneuver through the area. The site of the proposed project is listed as a blue zone on U.S. Geological Survey maps of The City — the coding for areas posing maximum risk. And any visitor to the site can see the difficulties created by trying to build on such a steep hillside — or the problems posed to emergency vehicles trying to gain access to the roads.

Yet with its sweeping views of Golden Gate Park and the Pacific Ocean, it would also be easy to see why someone would go to great lengths to develop it, even if it meant a protracted skirmish with the neighbors and The City.

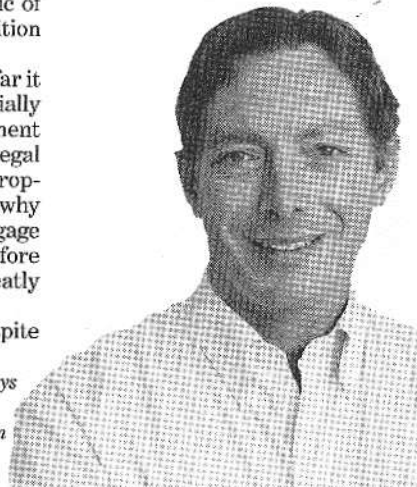
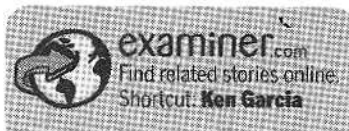
The neighborhood association actually owns part of the access road through which construction trucks would have to pass, a land gift that is part of a settlement with the parcel's previous owners. The association recently placed two sets of metal bollards on the road that would greatly inhibit any trucks from passing, perhaps symbolic of just how entrenched the opposition to the project is.

It's still too early to tell how far it will get in its latest turn, especially now that the former development partners are engaged in a legal battle over the rights to the property. But it certainly shows why most successful developers engage community members long before unveiling plans that would greatly affect a neighborhood.

"After all this time and despite

all this opposition, the entire plan remains basically unchanged," Sobol told me in describing the tumultuous history of the project.

If you know anything about San Francisco's planning process, you can expect that situation will change — even if it takes a few more years.



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