

CITY OF LARKSPUR, CALIFORNIA GENERAL PLAN

CHAPTER 3, COMMUNITY CHARACTER

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Chapter 3. Community Character

The City has set as a major goal to preserve, enhance, and strengthen community identity. The first part of this chapter briefly discusses the elements of Larkspur's community character, its boundaries, the natural and built environment, and the gateways to Larkspur. (Appendix A describes "gateways" into the city, and Appendix B portrays each of the city's 27 neighborhoods.) The section concludes with a set of Goals, Policies, and Programs that relate to community character.

This chapter also discusses historic and archaeological resources and concludes with a set of Goals, Policies, and Programs relating to the preservation of those assets.

THE ELEMENTS OF LARKSPUR'S CHARACTER

Larkspur is an unusual and fortunate community. Its character - tangible and identifiable - results from the combination of its small "Main Street" focus (Magnolia Avenue); the town's magnificent natural setting among mountains, valleys, and water; and its older residential areas, with their mature trees, immediately around Magnolia Avenue.

Boundaries

Larkspur's boundaries are not clear. Larkspur lies within Marin County's eastern urban

corridor, where most of the county's population lives, and is one of several communities in the Lower Ross Valley. Curving around Larkspur in the shape of a horseshoe on its northwest are the unincorporated communities of Kentfield and part of Greenbrae. The San Quentin Peninsula (east of Larkspur Landing to the Richmond/San Rafael Bridge) is also adjacent and within Larkspur's Planning Area.

In addition to the adjacent unincorporated areas, Larkspur is bounded by the cities of San Rafael on the north and Mill Valley and Corte Madera on the south. While highly visible ridges form natural boundaries between Larkspur and San Rafael and between Larkspur and Mill Valley, the city's boundaries with Corte Madera and unincorporated Greenbrae and Kentfield are not at all apparent. The absence of typical boundaries - creeks, major roadways, distinct changes in land use - makes it very difficult to identify where the transition occurs from one community to another. Indeed, half of Greenbrae is in the City of Larkspur and half is unincorporated, and its separate identity is reinforced by its postal zip code - Greenbrae 94904 (part of San Rafael's Post Office)--versus Larkspur 94939.

The Natural Environment

Throughout Marin County, open space - particularly along hillsides and ridgelines - has played a major role in shaping urban form. The general physical form of Larkspur and Corte Madera together can be described by viewing the left hand from above, with thumb and index finger separated and extended: The thumb represents the Corte Madera Ridge (Official USGS nomenclature. Its eastward extension between Corte Madera and Mill Valley is more commonly known as North Ridge (of Mill Valley).), which separates Larkspur from Mill Valley; the index finger represents the Southern Heights Ridge (Official USGS nomenclature), which separates Larkspur from San Rafael and extends eastward to form the San Quentin peninsula. The area between the thumb and index finger represents the flatter and more urbanized areas of Larkspur and Corte Madera. Where the thumb and index finger join, the Lower Ross Valley narrows and extends northwest into Kentfield and Ross. At the open end of the two fingers is the San Francisco Bay.

The only topographical separations between Larkspur and Corte Madera are Palm Hill and the right-of-way and embankments of the former Northwestern Pacific Railroad. Also, because Greenbrae is built on the visible south-facing slope of the "Southern Heights Ridge," the separation between Larkspur and San Rafael is not as clear.

Major highway routes have also been greatly affected by topography. Excluding Highway 101, there are only two continuous routes through Larkspur, and both were sited to conform to topography. Sir Francis Drake Boulevard is the east-west connection between West Marin, the Upper Ross Valley, Larkspur, San Quentin, and the East Bay. After coming east through the center of the Ross Valley, the road hugs the base of the Southern Heights Ridge (Greenbrae), and after passing north of Wood Island and the Ferry Terminal (two important landmarks), the road follows the shoreline of the Corte Madera Channel before diverting northward over the ridge and around San Quentin to the Richmond Bridge. The north-south route (College Avenue, Magnolia Avenue, Corte Madera Avenue, and Camino Alto) hugs the base of Ross Hill (opposite College of Marin) and the base of King Mountain (at Bon

Air Road).

Most of the area between these roads is flat land, water, and marsh. Major exceptions are Bon Air Hill, Wood Island, and Palm Hill. Corte Madera Creek flows through the center of the valley floor. Although the once natural lines of the creek have been engineered into a wide flood-control channel, the creek still meanders in several "S" curves. Overall, it is a pleasant looking waterway, and northwest of Bon Air Road, bicycle/pedestrian paths run along both banks.

The Built Environment

All of Larkspur's "flatland" housing lies in the valley between Magnolia Avenue and Sir Francis Drake Boulevard. The community's hillside houses are located on Palm Hill (a small landmark hill of single-family houses), on Bon Air Hill (a larger landmark, all multiple-family), in Greenbrae (north of Sir Francis Drake Boulevard to the top of Southern Heights Ridge, and all single-family), west of Magnolia (primarily single-family, with Skylark Apartments being a major exception), and east of Highway 101, north of Sir Francis Drake Boulevard (all multiple-family).

In very general terms, residences first developed in Larkspur west of the Northwestern Pacific Railroad; second, they were built north of Sir Francis Drake Boulevard (Greenbrae); and only third, did housing move into the flatland areas toward the creek. Greenbrae is the city's largest neighborhood and represents the second wave of houses. The third wave - the newest developments - lie east of Magnolia Avenue, north of Doherty Drive, south of Sir Francis Drake Boulevard.

These are very diverse areas. Many of them have views of and access to mountains and ridges, or to the creek and Bay, or both. Appendix B discusses each neighborhood in terms of its particular personality and amenities.

No discussion of the urban form or community character of Larkspur can overlook the role of Corte Madera Creek. While the creek is an obvious open space resource and provides a focus along the length of the community, it also divides north Larkspur from south Larkspur. Between College Avenue on the northwest and US Highway 101 on the east, only Bon Air Road bridges the creek. The result is that from the easterly sections of the community, one must go "out of town" - on a tortuous route through Corte Madera - to travel between north and south Larkspur.

Gateways

One's general impression of Larkspur depends on the point from which the community is entered or the place from which the city is observed. Larkspur is entered at six major gateways - one from the east (from East Sir Francis Drake Boulevard alongside San Quentin Prison); one from the north (descending from the Southern Heights Ridge southbound on US Highway 101); two from the west (southbound on College Avenue from the College of Marin, and eastbound on Sir Francis Drake Boulevard from Wolfe Grade Drive); and two from the south (northbound on Magnolia Avenue from Corte Madera, and northbound on US Highway 101 above the NWPRR right-of-way and just south of - before

- the Lucky Drive intersection). The visual impressions from each of the gateways is quite different; they are reviewed in Appendix A.

NEIGHBORHOODS

While there is some recognition of a larger image of community, most Larkspur citizens also see themselves as coming from a specific neighborhood. Many of these neighborhoods are named after the original development, which may have had only a few dozen homes. The size and location of these neighborhoods is a direct product of the scale and pace of development in Larkspur over the years. Thus, one way to define Larkspur is as a collection of neighborhoods.

Appendix B divides the city into five planning areas and 27 neighborhoods. (These are shown on Figure B-1 in Appendix B.) First the location and boundaries of the neighborhoods are described. Then, for each neighborhood, a more detailed description is provided.

GOALS, POLICIES, AND PROGRAMS

Larkspur's many assets include the historic and compact Downtown, the variety and individuality of the city's neighborhoods, the cohesiveness of several recent projects and planned developments, mature street and yard landscaping, many bicycle paths, etc. Detracting from the assets are the fragmentation of the community, the undefined boundaries, overhead utility lines, and traffic intrusion from other communities. (Regarding traffic intrusion, while it is true that Sir Francis Drake Boulevard and Magnolia Avenue carry traffic to other communities, that traffic does not pour through Larkspur's neighborhoods. In that respect, Larkspur is indeed fortunate.)

The following Goals, Policies, and Programs are designed to preserve and enhance the positives and eliminate the negatives.

Goal 1: Preserve, enhance, and strengthen community identity.

Policy a: Streets should be named for trees, natural features in the area, or local historic persons or places.

Goal 2: Maintain Larkspur's livable and attractive environment.

Policy b: Preserve the desirable features of the built environment as well as the remaining natural environment - trees, marshes, creeks, hillsides - as components of Larkspur's community character and identity.

Action Program [1]: Start a tree-planting and preservation program that will encourage sensitive site planning, the retention of existing trees, the planting of new trees (especially

native species), and the replacement of trees that are removed.

Policy c: Seek ways to strengthen the ties between neighborhoods while preserving neighborhood individuality and uniqueness.

Action Program [2]: Prepare an Urban Design Plan for Larkspur.

The Plan will identify the relationship between existing and proposed development and the natural setting, and will identify the characteristics of the natural and constructed environment that are considered desirable. Goals, policies, and programs will be developed to preserve and strengthen community character; to improve the design quality of new development, major remodelings, and public improvements; and, thus, to guide the design of development in the city into the next century.

Action Program [3]: Link neighborhoods with paths.

Policy d: Visually integrate the various sections of the community.

Action Program [4]: Make consistent use of common design elements such as street lamps, signs, street trees, the Larkspur banners, and landscaping.

For example, (1) Larkspur's distinctive pennant/banners could be installed at all public buildings and, in clusters, at all entrances to the City; (2) Victorian or other older-looking street lamps could be installed Downtown, with more modern lamps used elsewhere in the city. (Were the latter example implemented - to strengthen community identity - probably no more than two or three types of lamps should be used in the entire city, with each type carefully selected in terms of appearance, function, cost, maintenance, and ability to withstand vandalism.)

Policy e: Draw the community together; psychologically and socially integrate the various sections of the community.

Action Program [5]: Sponsor community-wide events and programs and community improvement programs.

Policy f: Seek to eliminate overlapping political and geographical divisions within Larkspur.

Policy g: As opportunities arise, modify the boundaries for municipal functions (police, fire, land use, sewage, storm drainage, school districts, etc.) so that they become more coterminous.

Larkspur already provides police and fire service and regulates land use within its boundaries, but the city is divided among several school districts. Greenbrae and Kentfield are divided among police, fire, and land use. All of these areas have in common their trash collection service, water supply, and flood control.

Action Program [6]: Pursue annexations and de-annexations as necessary to foster more rational service area boundaries.

Appropriate environmental analyses should be undertaken for all annexations and de-annexations pursuant to this program.

HISTORIC RESOURCES

This Historic Resources portion of this chapter replaces the 1978 Heritage Preservation Element which established the City's comprehensive program for identifying and preserving historic resources.

Much of Larkspur's charm and character derives from its rich architectural heritage. Its historic resources are irreplaceable assets that contribute to the special and unique character of the city and are a source of identity and pride for its residents. In recognition of the importance of these resources to its community image, Larkspur has made a major commitment to historic preservation, in both the public and private sector.

In the 1970s, the Larkspur Heritage Committee took the first steps toward an historic preservation program by surveying the city to identify historic buildings, places, and organizations. Their survey resulted in the publication of *Larkspur Past and Present*, a comprehensive 140-page document which organizes all the identified historic places into eight geographical areas: Downtown Larkspur; Central Larkspur; "The Loop"; Baltimore (Madrone) Canyon; Baltimore Park; Boardwalk #1 (Larkspur Boardwalk) and the Magnolia Avenue Victorians; North Larkspur (Murray Park and Escalle); and Greenbrae, San Quentin Peninsula, and Greenbrae Boardwalk.

The survey provided the foundation for action by the Larkspur City Council in 1978 to adopt an historic preservation program. The Council added a Heritage Preservation Element to the General Plan; created an Historic Preservation Board; added an Historic District to the Larkspur zoning ordinance; and approved an Historic Resources Inventory.

The City's historic resources inventory - based on the list in *Larkspur Past and Present* - is described by ordinance as "structures, sites, areas, and natural phenomena" which fit one or more of the following criteria: reminders of events and persons important in history, examples of once-common structures, unique or irreplaceable assets, examples essential to maintaining the overall historic character of an area, or structures having architectural significance.

The "H" Historic combining zone has been applied to Downtown properties fronting on both sides of Magnolia Avenue between William Avenue and Doherty Drive, and has also been applied to the Remillard Brick Kiln on East Sir Francis Drake Boulevard. In addition to the local designation of historic places, the Remillard Brick Kiln, the Dolliver House at 58 Madrone, the Alexander Avenue Bridge, and the entire Downtown have been placed on the National Register of Historic Places. The Brick Kiln is also a State Historic Landmark (Conversation with Nancy Curley, Larkspur Heritage Preservation Committee Board, May 17, 1989.).

The Dolliver House is said to be the first house constructed in the new township of

Larkspur in 1888.

The Alexander Avenue Bridge is a concrete structure which arches over the old Northwestern Pacific Railroad tracks between Alexander and Acacia Avenues. It was built in 1927.

Thirty historic buildings and sites, including City Hall, are in the Downtown Historic District. The buildings "present a capsule history of the town," according to *Larkspur Past and Present*, because all periods of the city's history are represented.

The Remillard Brickyard was a booming operation from 1891 to 1915. The kiln was restored as part of the construction of an office development on the site (*Larkspur Past and Present* (Larkspur Heritage Committee, 1979).

The heritage preservation program is designed to be a community activity, relying on citizen participation for its effectiveness. The program establishes a framework for the identification, establishment, and protection of sites, structures, and artifacts of architectural, historical, archaeological (see next section) or cultural significance. Also protected are significant natural resources, geologic features, trees, and other plant materials.

ARCHAEOLOGICAL RESOURCES

The Coast Miwok Indians lived along Larkspur's marshes and creeks, and hunted in the heavily wooded hills around Mount Tamalpais until the 1800s. Their ancestors lived in the area as long as 3,600 years ago. Evidence of their prehistoric presence has been found in eleven "shell mounds" within the Larkspur Sphere of Influence (five of them within the city limits), as well as a habitation site near College of Marin, CA-MRN-406, and a quarry site, CA-MRN-525, within the city limits)[Communication with Vicki Beard, California Archaeological Inventory, Northwest Information Center, June 30, 1989. The shell mounds are sites CA-MRN-67 through 79 and CA-MRN-255.]. Finds of prehistoric material have included chert and obsidian flakes, projectile points, mortars and pestles, shells and bones, and human burials.

The exact location of these sites is kept confidential by the California Archaeological Inventory (CAI) to prevent vandalism and artifact hunting and to protect landowners from trespass (California Government Code (6254.10 exempts archaeological site information from the California Public Records Act which otherwise requires that public records be open to public inspection.). Access to site location information is usually limited to landowners, cultural resource consultants, planners, and scholarly researchers. Those granted such access sign an agreement to keep the information confidential and not to disclose it to unauthorized individuals or in documents distributed to the public.

In addition, one unrecorded site is known to exist within the Sphere of Influence, near the upper end of Baltimore Canyon. A possible site on Wood Island has been mentioned locally, but CAI has no records of an archaeological site at that location. It should be noted,

however, that less than five percent of the Larkspur Sphere of Influence has been surveyed for cultural resources, and there is a high probability of additional unrecorded sites (Communication from Vicki Beard, California Archaeological Inventory, Northwest Information Center, June 30, 1989.). Therefore, before any ground-disturbing activity occurs, it is important that archival or field studies or both be conducted on a project-specific basis.

Goals, Policies, and Programs for Historic and Cultural Resources

Goal 3: Assure the survival of Larkspur's special "sense of place."

Policy h: Encourage broad-based community interest in and support of preservation activities.

Policy i: Identify significant archaeological, historic, and natural resources representing all of the ethnic, cultural, and economic groups that have lived and worked in Larkspur.

Action Program [7]: Maintain an up-to-date inventory of existing historic resources, including artifacts, structures, sites, areas, and natural phenomena.

Action Program [8]: Maintain a City-adopted list of historic, archaeological, and natural resources worthy of preservation.

Action Program [9]: Map the location of historic districts and historic and natural resources.

Policy j: Safeguard and maintain significant historic, archaeological, and natural resources.

Action Program [10]: Administer the heritage preservation ordinance so as to provide for the appropriate development and maintenance of historic resources and their environments.

Action Program [11]: Maintain and support the Heritage Preservation Board.

The Heritage Preservation Board is the body that recommends to the City Council the designation of historic resources either for landmark or historic district status, or for "H" zoning. In conducting its work, the Board prepares forms and submits applications for properties determined to be worthy of being listed as State Landmarks or placed on the National Register of Historic Places. It issues certificates of recognition for locally designated historic resources.

Under the "H" zoning, all applications for building, grading, or demolition permits, or on any other work which might be authorized by zoning, are subject to review and action by the Heritage Preservation Board. The Board may recommend conditions of approval to the appropriate City review person or body.

Action Program [12]: Apply the "H" Historic zone to other historic buildings or places, such as the Escalle Winery.

Insofar as possible, seek the cooperation of property owners for historic designation and zoning.

Policy k: Accommodate anticipated development and population growth in ways that will not damage Larkspur's historic, archaeological, and natural resources.

Action Program [13]: Provide a quick-response mechanism for saving resources threatened by construction or demolition.

Action Program [14]: Establish design guidelines for property owners, developers, and public agencies to use with respect to land use and building construction in areas of identified historic, archaeological, or natural significance.

Action Program [15]: Review all public policies, and modify them as necessary, to support the policies of this chapter to protect and preserve historic, archaeological, and natural resources while protecting the general health, welfare, and safety of the public.

Action Program [16]: Direct capital improvement programs toward protecting, preserving, rehabilitating, and enhancing historic, archaeological, and natural resources.

This effort might include locating existing federal, State, regional, and local funding resources to underwrite preservation and rehabilitation; exploring private funding sources for the same purpose; and developing training programs in the crafts and skills needed for preserving historic, archaeological, and natural resources.

Action Program [17]: Provide local incentives for restoring and maintaining historic, archaeological, and natural resources.

These might include reduction or elimination of application, permit, or hook-up fees; flexibility in land uses allowed; or increases in density.

Action Program [18]: Coordinate City and other public agency programs so that the City's objectives and standards for preserving historic, archaeological, and natural resources are met.

For example, the City should assure that the State's alternative building code requirements for historic structures are followed.

Action Program [19]: Use the principles and practices of land use planning to promote the preservation of historic, archaeological, and natural resources.

The City should review its existing zoning regulations to identify deficiencies relating to preservation, and should then adopt amendments to foster preservation.

Goals, Policies, and Programs for Archaeological Resources

Goal 4: Promote a greater awareness of and sensitivity toward Larkspur's archaeological heritage.

Policy l: The City shall cooperate with the CAI toward the protection and preservation of artifacts in those areas already identified as containing archaeological remains.

Policy m: The City shall cooperate with the CAI in the development of information which will allow the prediction of additional sites likely to contain archaeological remains.

Action Program [20]: Programs of public information will be initiated to make property owners aware of background data on archaeologically significant structures or sites on their properties.

Action Program [21]: All development applications and public projects that require EIRs will routinely be sent to the "California Archaeological Inventory - Northwest Information Center" at the Department of Anthropology, Sonoma State University, for review and recommendations regarding archaeological findings.

In those areas identified as being the actual or probable sites of archaeological remains, any projects on City land or requiring the issuance of permits by the City will be investigated during plan review to determine whether valuable archaeological remains will be affected by the project. Upon the first discovery of any archaeological findings, development activity will be halted until professional archaeological examination and preservation is accomplished.

Policy n: The City shall take all possible precautions to insure that no action by the City results in the loss of the irreplaceable archaeological record present in the City's planning jurisdiction, and shall work with the County toward that end.

Action Program [22]: The City shall promote the preservation of archaeological sites by considering any significant remains in its planning for parks.

Funds from federal, State and local sources should be sought to acquire archaeological sites for park or other public purposes, and to preserve any artifacts.

Action Program [23]: The City may permit land uses other than those designated on the General Plan Land Use and Circulation map on sites with archaeological merit, in order to preserve the archaeological record.

The substitute use would have to be compatible with the surrounding area or the proposed development of the surrounding area. The effect of this program is to permit a land use other than the use called for on the General Plan Land Use and Circulation map, if that substitution will preserve archaeological qualities.

Action Program [24]: Where an archaeological site is in proximity to a project under review, City staff in conjunction with CAI will determine the particular qualities to be preserved and the methods of preservation.