HISTORIC RESOURCE EVALUATION

1715 Elm Street
El Cerrito, California

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Prepared by

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I. Introduction

VerPlanck Historic Preservation Consulting prepared this Historic Resource Evaluation (HRE) for a property located at 1715 Elm Street in El Cerrito, California. The subject property, which is presently unoccupied, is located on the west side of Elm Street, between Hill and Blake streets (Assessor’s Parcel No. 502-112-038) in north-central El Cerrito (Figure 1).¹ The subject property is rectangular and comprises roughly 18,450 square feet. Historically utilized as a “weekend ranch,” the property is now surrounded by single-family dwellings dating from the immediate post-World War II era and more recent multi-family residential buildings from the 1970s and 1980s. Originally purchased by Ambrose Rodoni in 1897, the subject property contains a Queen Anne-style, single-family dwelling constructed in 1897; a ca. 1930 garage; and several other outbuildings and site features, including a well house and shed constructed after 1969; and a stone-lined creek channel that transects the property from east to west.

The property was the subject of a report prepared by architectural historian Michael Corbett in 2006. This HRE, which builds upon Corbett’s research, independently concludes that 1715 Elm Street appears eligible for listing in the California Register of Historical Resources (California Register) under Criterion 1 (Events) for its associations with the pioneer development of El Cerrito and the formation of the city’s Little Italy district. This HRE also finds the property eligible under Criterion 3 (Design/Construction) as an intact and very rare example of a rural vernacular cultural landscape in El Cerrito. As such, the property appears to be a historical resource under Section 15064.5 (a) of the California Environmental Quality Act.

¹ The streets in this part of El Cerrito are not aligned with the points of the compass, meaning that Elm Street actually runs from northwest to southeast. To remain consistent with the proposed project and other project documents, this HRE will treat the site as if its boundaries are aligned with the compass.
(CEQA). This HRE concludes with an assessment of the potential impacts of the proposed project, which entails the relocation of the Rodoni house to the southwest corner of the property, and the construction of a new 14-unit condominium building on the balance of the site; as well as suggested mitigation measures that may reduce the project impacts to a less-than-significant level.

II. Methods

Michael Corbett, the author of the 2006 report mentioned above, is one of the Bay Area’s most well-respected architectural historians. His research is typically reliable; hence this HRE relies in large part on the historic contexts outlined in his 2006 study. VerPlanck Historical Preservation Consulting conducted additional primary and secondary research to answer specific questions unanswered in Corbett’s report, including information on the unnamed creek that transects the property, as well as additional information on the Rodoni family and El Cerrito’s Little Italy neighborhood. We consulted the following repositories to complete this additional work, including the El Cerrito Planning Division, the El Cerrito Historical Society, and historic newspaper databases available through the Library of Congress, the San Francisco Public Library, and the Historic Newspaper Archive. We also consulted historic and contemporary maps, including late nineteenth and early twentieth-century United States Geological Society (USGS) maps and Sanborn Fire Insurance maps, several of which are reproduced in this HRE. Christopher VerPlanck visited the property on September 25, 2012 to survey the site with Scott Davidson of PMC and photographed every building, structure, and landscape feature, as well as the surrounding context.

III. Regulatory Framework

VerPlanck Historic Preservation Consulting searched federal, state, and local records to determine if 1715 Elm Street had been identified in any survey or official register of historical resources. We submitted a request to the Northwest Information Center (NWIC) at Sonoma State University to determine whether the property is listed in the state’s Historic Property Database and we also consulted with the El Cerrito Historical Society to determine whether the property is listed on any local register of historical resources. According to the NWIC, 1715 Elm Street is not listed in the state’s Historic Property Database. It is also not listed in the Contra Costa County Historic Resources Inventory. Furthermore, the City of El Cerrito has never been comprehensively surveyed and it maintains no official inventory of historical, architectural, or cultural resources. In summary, 1715 Elm Street has no formal historical status.

IV. Project Area

1715 Elm Street is located in north-central El Cerrito, two blocks north and east of BART’s Richmond Line right-of-way (Figure 2). The subject property is located about equidistant between Interstate 80 and the Berkeley Hills, which begin about two blocks north and east of the subject property. Historically a semirural area of small ranches and isolated single-family dwellings, the area immediately surrounding the property was built out during the post-World War II era as suburban development overtook the once semi-rural enclave of Little Italy. The project area is generally level, though the terrain slopes gently downhill toward the south and west in the direction of San Francisco Bay. The terrain slopes more steadily uphill toward the north and east in the direction of the Berkeley Hills. The street network is laid out in a conventional gridiron plan, though streets running in the same direction do not always align because of the different private subdivisions that subdivided the area during the late 1890s. Natural features like hills and ravines have resulted in some variations in the gridiron plan, and more recent planned unit developments have resulted in cul-de-sacs and other pockets of non-orthogonal street plans. Commercial property uses are clustered along San Pablo Avenue, three blocks south and west of the subject proper-
ty. The El Cerrito del Norte BART station is located one block north and west of 1715 Elm Street. Another local landmark is the Windrush School, which is located a little more than a block distant.

Figure 2. Aerial photograph showing the subject property and its vicinity
Source: Google Maps; annotated by Christopher VerPlanck

V. Property Description

A. General Description

1715 Elm Street occupies what were historically three parcels (Lots 12, 13, 14) of Block B of the Schmidt Village subdivision. The subdivision was laid out in 1896 in a conventional gridiron pattern with each lot measuring 50’ wide by 130’ deep. Many of the older suburban areas of the East Bay were also laid out in this way, yielding generous house lots with enough room left over for a garage or stable, gardens, and tank house, windmill, or other outbuildings. Over time, Ambrose and Virginia Rodoni purchased the three adjoining lots, creating a landholding measuring 150’ along Elm Street (originally Union Street) and 130’ into the block. This property, comprising nearly half an acre, was sufficient to create a compact “weekend ranch” capable of supporting their growing family with homegrown produce, fruit, wine, and possibly livestock. Water from a well and the unnamed creek that transects the property was used to irrigate the crops and to provide drinking water, until the property was hooked up to municipal water in the 1940s. Until World War II, 1715 Elm Street was surrounded by similar semi-rural properties. Though the surrounding neighborhood suburbanized after the war, 1715 Elm Street remained a rural enclave – mainly because it stayed in the same family, whose members continued to cultivate the land until 2002. Although the property has been untended for a decade, it continues to embody the characteristics of a compact “ranch” dating to the pioneer era of El Cerrito’s settlement (Figure 3).
Presently 1715 Elm Street contains four buildings: the main house, garage, well house, and shed; as well as several cultural landscape features, including a stone-lined creek channel, several footbridges over the creek, fencing, fruit trees, trellises for grape cultivation, and other features characteristic of rural agricultural properties. The 1897 house is located near the front of what was originally the central lot (Lot 13). To the rear of the house, near the west lot line, is a severely dilapidated wood-frame garage built before 1930. It is accessed by an unpaved driveway that enters the property north of the house. Between the house and the garage is a crude shed made of steel, wood, and fiberglass panels. The shed appears to be of relatively recent origin. A small, wood-frame well house is located at the southwest corner of the property, on the south bank of the creek.

The unnamed creek, which roughly follows the former property line between Lots 13 and 14, appears on the 1895 and 1897 USGS maps. Though subsequently “undergrounded” throughout the rest of the neighborhood, the Rodoni family left the creek exposed on their land, though they straightened its channel by constructing stone retaining walls on either bank. Fruit trees – primarily apples, persimmons, and citrus – are located throughout the site. Portions of the south (Lot 14) and the north parcel (Lot 12) have irrigation equipment (pipes, spigots, and “rain bird” sprinklers) installed, suggesting that these portions of the property were once planted with row crops. Wood fencing encloses the north, west, and south property lines, and older wire fencing encloses the east (Elm Street) side of the property. Elm Street was widened ca. 1960, and the City took a strip of the Rodoni property to build a sidewalk. At this time the family re-landscaped the front yard with concrete parterres, footpaths, and planting beds. Untended for a decade, much of the property is overgrown with weeds, volunteer trees and shrubs, and untended but still-productive fruit trees (Figure 4).
B. Rodoni House

According to the 2006 Corbett report, the Rodoni house was constructed in 1897 by Ambrose Rodoni. Based on information from the Contra Costa County Assessor, it is the third-oldest building in El Cerrito. The Rodoni house is a two-story, wood-frame, T-plan, Queen-Anne style dwelling with a compound hip and gable roof. The house is of standard platform-frame construction and it is framed with 2 x 4 redwood studs and 2 x 8 joists spaced 16” on center. The exterior walls are clad in V-groove redwood rustic siding and decorative shingles and the roof is clad in non-historic asphalt shingles. The dwelling consists of a main living floor over a raised and partially finished basement, with an unfinished attic above. In terms of its styling, the Rodoni house can be described as a vernacular dwelling with Queen Anne detailing. It is representative of a type of vernacular housing once common in the rural East Bay, and that is still found in some older parts of Oakland, Berkeley, and Alameda.

East Façade

The east (primary) façade of the Rodoni house is three bays wide and faces Elm Street (Figure 5). The left bay has an angled bay window containing three, non-historic aluminum slider windows encased within plain wood moldings. This bay is capped by a pedimented gable defined by a molded raking cornice (Figure 6). The flat area within the gable (the tympanum) is clad in alternating courses of diamond and fish-scale-pattern shingles. The center bay is flush with the main body of the house, though it is sheltered beneath a projecting, gable-roofed porch supported by turned wood posts (Figure 7). The porch is accessed by a flight of six wood steps bounded within plain wood balusters. It is capped by semi-circular arched openings and a pedimented gable whose tympanum is also clad in alternating courses of diamond and fish-scale pattern shingles. The main entrance contains a solid-panel wood door, dating from the 1940s, which has wrought-iron hardware. The door is flanked to the left by a metal mailbox and an outdoor light fixture. The right bay is very simple, consisting of a single aluminum slider window with plain wood trim (Figure 8). The basement level of the primary façade is punctuated by an assortment of rectangular vents, water spigots, and utility meters.
North Façade
Similar to the other three non-street-facing façades, the north façade of the Rodoni house is utilitarian and devoid of ornament (Figure 9). Aside from a boarded-up window at the basement level, the left bay is a windowless expanse of rustic redwood siding capped by a subsidiary hipped roof. At the basement level, the north façade steps back several feet to provide access to the utility rooms in this part of the house. In this recessed area, the second bay in from the street features a boarded-up entrance and an aluminum slider window. The third bay in from the street features a boarded-up window at the basement level and a large aluminum slider window at the first floor level. The basement level fenestration is sheltered beneath a shed-roofed porch supported by a single wood post. The fourth (right) bay in from the street is part of the later shed-roofed kitchen addition. It is windowless and clad in rustic redwood siding.
West Façade
The west (rear) façade of the Rodoni house is characterized by an assemblage of older ad hoc additions added onto the back of the original dwelling. Entirely clad in redwood rustic siding, the rear façade has two shed-roofed additions (one housing part of the kitchen – the other a utility room) that span the width of the house (Figure 10). According to the permit record, these additions were added in 1907 and 1912, respectively. Attached to the rear of these additions is a later, gable-roofed mud room addition and wood stair supported by metal pipe columns.
South Façade
The south façade of the Rodoni house is similar to the corresponding north façade (Figure 11). It is three bays wide, with the left bay corresponding to the rear kitchen addition. Clad in redwood rustic siding, this section of the south façade features a double-hung aluminum window at the first floor level. The center bay contains a pair of windows at the basement level (both are boarded-up) and a large aluminum slider window at the first floor level. The right bay is a largely blank expanse of redwood rustic siding, though there is a boarded-up window at the basement level.

VerPlanck Historic Preservation Consulting did not survey the interior of the Rodoni house. The following description is extracted from Corbett’s 2006 report.

The Rodoni house was built in 1897. It is a two-story structure with a high, open attic space. Although its lower floor is almost entirely above ground, this floor is generally referred to as a basement. Thus, this building with enough space for rooms on three floors was built with finished interiors only on the raised main floor; the basement was long utilized as a work space, including making wine and canning fruit and vegetables, and the attic space was never finished or utilized unless, perhaps, for storage. When this
house was built, it was common to provide unfinished space that might later be occupied to accommodate a growing family or when money was available to do the work. In the 1940s the rear of the basement was finished to provide rooms and a bath for a divorced relative.

The main floor plan is somewhat symmetrical in the overall form of a “T,” with the cross bar presenting a wide front to the street and the narrower stem projecting toward the rear. It consists of a generally central corridor with a room on either side at the front of the house and a narrow bathroom behind the front room at the corner. Partitions have been removed behind the front rooms so that what was once two rooms in the stem of the “T” is now a single irregular space. At the rear of the house are two small shed additions that now house the kitchen and a utility room. These may have been added in unspecified remodelings in 1907 and 1912 noted on the Residential Building Record. The central hall plan was typical of houses of its era. The maximum dimensions of the house are approximately 31 1/2 feet across the front and 48 feet from the front to back.

Downstairs, there is a bedroom, a living room, and a bathroom in the stem, created in 1954. Under the front of the house is an unfinished work space.

The attic is high enough to accommodate a room, if a dormer were added for light and stairs for access. The structure of the room, without columns or low trusses that obstruct the space, indicates that such a possibility was initially contemplated.

The house was long provided with water from a well on the property; city water was hooked up in the 1940s. It appears that there was no electricity available in the area until 1911-13, after which knob and tube wiring was installed. Heat originally came only from a stove on the north side behind the front room and bath, where a brick chimney is still visible. Building Department records show that a forced air furnace was installed in 1965.

Original interior finishes included painted tongue-and-groove paneling on walls and ceiling. This was all replaced in 1968. Today there are no original interior features.²

C. Garage

Located behind the house, the garage was built before 1930 by the Rodoni family to provide shelter for their vehicles and possibly farm equipment (Figure 12). It is a one-story, wood-frame, rectangular-plan building measuring 19’ by 21’ in plan. It has a concrete perimeter foundation and a concrete slab floor. The building is of post-and-beam construction and it is clad in vertical wood planks with thin battens concealing the gaps between the boards. The north façade, which has a small lean-to addition, is clad in non-historic corrugated metal siding. The roof is covered in rolled asphalt. The exterior has one boarded up window on the south façade. The interior, which has space for two vehicles, is accessed via a pair of hinged wood doors on the east façade. A metal electrical pole is mounted to the primary façade. Next to it is a metal gooseneck light fixture.

D. Shed

Located between the Rodoni house and the garage is an open-ended steel and wood-frame shed clad in wood and fiberglass panels (Figure 13). It encloses an 11’ x 17’ interior that is open to the elements at the north side of the structure. This structure was built after 1969 to shelter farm equipment or a vehicle. The structure is supported by metal pipe columns and wood studs. The walls are clad in corrugated metal and fiberglass panels and the ceiling, which is supported by wood rafters, is clad in corrugated steel. There is a wood pedestrian door on the west façade. The floor is packed earth.

E. Well House

The well house is located near the southwest corner of the property (Figure 14). Possibly built after 1968, when the original windmill and tank house were demolished, the small building encloses an interior space measuring 5’ x 7’-6”. The building is of wood-frame construction and is clad in redwood rustic siding. The building has a concrete slab floor with a hole that sits directly above the well. At one point it probably contained an electric pump. The building appears to have been built of salvaged materials, perhaps from the old tank house that stood near here. The building’s interior is accessed by a salvaged wood-panel door and the interior contains remnants of old knob-and-tube wiring. At one point the building had a corrugated fiberglass roof, which is now missing.
Figure 13. Shed; view toward south
Source: Christopher VerPlanck

Figure 14. Well House; view toward southwest
Source: Christopher VerPlanck
F. Creek

The unnamed creek that runs through the southern third of the property is arguably the most distinctive feature of 1715 Elm Street (Figures 15 and 16). In addition to appearing on nineteenth-century USGS maps, the Contra Costa County Assessor shows the unnamed creek on its GIS maps, indicating that it is not simply a ditch but an actual creek. The creek is about 10’ wide at the top of the stone-banked channel and between 4’ and 5’ deep. The creek, which was flowing when the author visited the site, enters the property from the east, exiting a culvert that passes beneath Elm Street. The creek “daylights” on the Elm Street side of the property, where it is contained within a manmade channel bounded by dry-laid stone walls. The stone is not uniformly dressed and appears to have been installed to keep the creek within its bed and prevent erosion. The creek exits the property to the west, where it passes beneath a fence and enters a culvert beneath the adjoining property. The creek does not appear to daylight anywhere else between the subject property and the creek’s presumed outlet at San Francisco Bay. The creek is bridged at several places by non-historic wood bridges, metal pipes, and scrap lumber. Sanborn maps from 1930 and 1951 show a wood-frame enclosure covering the western third of the creek. The purpose of this structure is unknown and it either fell down or was demolished after 1960. The creek was a functional feature of the property and was evidently used for irrigation long after the Rodoni house was hooked up to municipal water in the 1940s.

Figure 15. Creek and bridge, looking southwest
Source: Christopher VerPlanck

3 The 1895 and 1898 USGS maps show the unnamed creek (as well as several others in the area) running down from the Berkeley Hills, branching into several subsidiary creeks, and then dissipating in the level coastal plain. This part of El Cerrito is known for its high water tables, and it is possible that these creeks were either seasonal or that they just died out in the high water table, not reaching San Francisco Bay.
VI. Historical Context

A. Historical Background of El Cerrito

El Cerrito is a city of 23,549 people in western Contra Costa County. The suburban city is bordered by Richmond to the north, east, and west and Albany and Kensington to the south. Long a semi-rural stronghold, due in part to uncertainty over land titles dating back to the Gold Rush, El Cerrito only began to grow in earnest after the 1906 Earthquake. Still, rural and semi-rural conditions persisted in parts of the city until World War II, when a massive influx of war workers employed in the shipyards of nearby Richmond caused the population of El Cerrito to explode. Today the city is almost entirely built-out, with very few opportunities to construct new housing on open land.

Early History
Prior to the arrival of Spanish colonists in the last quarter of the eighteenth century, what is now El Cerrito was inhabited by the Huchuin tribelet of the Ohlone people, who hunted, fished, and practiced proto-agriculture along the banks of Cerrito and Wildcat Creeks, and San Francisco Bay. After the Spanish arrived in the Bay Area in 1769, what is now El Cerrito became part of the lands of Mission Dolores, in San Francisco. In 1823, following Mexico’s successful War of Independence from Spain, the Mexican Governor of California, Luís Antonio Argüello, granted 17,939 acres of land in present-day Contra Costa County to Francisco María Castro, a Spanish soldier and one-time alcalde of the Pueblo of San José. Following his death in 1831, the grant was reconfirmed by Governor José Figueroa to Castro’s heirs, includ-
ing his son Victor Castro. In 1839, Victor Castro built an adobe dwelling on what is now the site of the El Cerrito Plaza shopping center.\(^4\)

The United States conquered northern Mexico and annexed it to the United States in 1848 – the same year that gold was discovered at Sutter’s Mill in the Sierra foothills. The population of San Francisco and the Bay region in general began to grow very quickly due to the Gold Rush. Statehood followed two years later, in 1850, and that same year Contra Costa County became one of California’s original 27 counties. During this time what is today’s San Pablo Avenue became a popular road between Oakland, in neighboring Alameda County (formed in 1853 from parts of Contra Costa and Santa Clara counties), and Martinez, the county seat of Contra Costa County.

Still, coastal Contra Costa County remained mostly uninhabited until the opening of the California & Nevada Railroad in 1883, which paralleled San Pablo Avenue from its terminus in Emeryville to Richmond. This route, which closely followed what is now BART’s Richmond line, opened western Contra Costa County to settlement and industrial development. In 1902, the Santa Fe Railroad purchased the line and upgraded it from narrow to standard gauge, linking what is now El Cerrito to the world via the Santa Fe’s transcontinental network.\(^5\)

After the opening of the California & Nevada Railroad, settlers began to lease land from Victor Castro, still one of the biggest landowners in what is now El Cerrito. One of these settlers was a man named William F. Rust, a German immigrant, who in 1883 leased land from Castro on San Pablo Road, near the Alameda County line (El Cerrito Creek). Eventually a village, named Rust, began to grow up around the intersection of San Pablo and Central avenues. Rust was one of several villages to grow up in what is now El Cerrito, which at various times also included the settlements of Gallagher, Stege, Stege Junction, Gills, McAvoys, Schmidtville, and others. Many of these settlements were nothing more than a railroad stop and a handful of houses and most of these names have long since fallen out of use. The subject property was part of Schmidtville because it was closest to a flag stop on the Santa Fe line called Schmidt.

Even with the opening of the California & Nevada Railroad, it took another decade for large-scale subdivision activity to get underway in El Cerrito. The lag stemmed in part from ongoing confusion over who owned the land that comprised Rancho San Pablo. When Francisco Castro died in 1831, he left his property to his widow, Gabriella (50 percent), and his 11 children (50 percent). Each of his children received an undivided interest in the property, meaning that each of his children owned a 1/22\(^{nd}\) interest in every square inch of Rancho San Pablo. Though his children were required to consult with each other before selling any land, several made unauthorized sales. Some tracts were sold more than once to different people and three of Castro’s children died intestate, meaning that their shares reverted to Gabriella, further complicating matters. The Gordian knot of twisted land titles was not resolved until 1894, when Judge J.C.B Hebbard issued a Final Decree of Partition on March 3. The Final Decree provided a list of every landowner within the boundaries of Rancho San Pablo as well as a map depicting each holding and its boundaries. The map indicates that with the exception of several small-scale holdings around Rust, most of El Cerrito remained in several large landholdings. Most of these parcels were evidently leased to tenant farmers who used the land for grazing cattle or growing crops.\(^6\)

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\(^6\) Ibid., 25.
With the question of land ownership finally resolved in 1894, individual speculators began buying large tracts and subdividing them into smaller parcels ranging in size from 25’ x 100’ house lots to larger “villa” lots of up to five acres. The earliest subdivision in El Cerrito was the Schmidt & Fink Tract of 1893. Encompassing most of the land on the east side of San Pablo Avenue between Moeser and Schmidt lanes, the Schmidt & Fink Tract was laid out in one-acre parcels suitable for residential development or small-scale ranching or farming. This tract was soon followed by the Beauty Tract in 1894, Schmidt Village in 1896, and Schmidt Village Tracts 2 and 3 in 1900.⁷

The population of the East Bay spiked after the 1906 Earthquake and Fire destroyed much of San Francisco. Relatively undamaged, the cities of Oakland, Alameda, and Berkeley – as well as unincorporated parts of Alameda and Contra Costa Counties – absorbed thousands of earthquake refugees. Some of these newcomers came to what is now El Cerrito. Still, as late as 1908, local city directories indicate that there were only around 100 households in El Cerrito. Nonetheless, census schedules from 1910 indicate a small but steadily growing community of quarry workers, railroad employees, ranch hands, and nurserymen, including a diverse assortment of Italian, French, Portuguese, Irish, Russian, German, English, Canadian, Swedish, and Japanese immigrants, as well as several dozen native-born Americans. Several of the city’s oldest houses were constructed during this pioneer period of El Cerrito’s history – the 12 year period from the Partition Decree of 1894 to the 1906 Earthquake.⁸

**El Cerrito Incorporates**

In 1916, the residents of Rust, the only remaining urbanized part of what is now El Cerrito since Stege was annexed by Richmond in 1912, decided to rename their unincorporated community “El Cerrito,” in honor of Cerrito Creek and nearby El Cerrito Hill (now called Albany Hill).⁹ In 1917, the residents of unincorporated El Cerrito began lobbying Contra Costa County for services, including paved streets, utilities, schools, and other infrastructure. Unsuccessful in these efforts, local residents realized that the community would either have to incorporate or join an existing city. Although some residents were in favor of annexation by Richmond, others thought that El Cerrito should be its own city. As momentum grew in favor of incorporation, advocates drew up maps of the new city that encompassed all of southwestern Contra Costa County, including the Richmond Annex and Kensington communities. Large property owners in Kensington opposed incorporation on the grounds that agricultural ventures would be disrupted. Richmond, which had long viewed the Richmond Annex as being within its own sphere of influence, successfully beat back El Cerrito’s attempts to include the area within the new city (Figure 17). With Kensington and the Richmond Annex excluded, the remaining residents voted in favor of incorporation on August 16, 1917. Four days later, El Cerrito formally became the tenth city in Contra Costa County.¹⁰

El Cerrito grew slowly, increasing to only 1,505 in 1920 – an uptick of only 73 people since incorporation. Despite the availability of transit, a salubrious climate, and inexpensive real estate, there was simply too much land available in the more established cities of Richmond, Berkeley, and Albany to inspire people to move to El Cerrito. In contrast to the rest of the East Bay, El Cerrito remained a preserve of the small agriculturalist and the “weekend rancher.” Growth picked up during the nationwide real estate boom of the 1920s, with El Cerrito’s population doubling to 3,808 in 1930. Despite the onset of the Depression in 1929, El Cerrito continued to grow – mostly because of an influx of defense workers employed in the

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⁷ Ibid., 28.  
¹⁰ Ibid., 21.
shipyards of nearby Richmond. Because of this influx, the population doubled again in 1940, reaching 6,514. The influx continued unabated until the end of World War II, with new residents taking up residence in trailer camps, hastily converted in-law apartments, and temporary war workers’ housing. By the 1950s, El Cerrito had been completely transformed from a semi-rural enclave into a modern, mid-century suburb.

B. Project Site History

The Rodoni property is part of the Schmidt Village subdivision, a 600-acre tract of former rangeland and wheat fields subdivided in 1896 by Berkeley postmaster and capitalist, George Schmidt.\(^\text{11}\) When combined with the earlier Schmidt & Fink Tract of 1893, Schmidt’s holdings formed a large U-shaped tract extending north and east from San Pablo Avenue along Hill Street, and then southeast – following an imaginary line along the base of the Berkeley Hills (paralleling Navellier Lane) – and then back to San Pablo Avenue along Schmidt Lane (excepting the “donut hole” bounded by San Pablo Avenue, Blake Street, Navellier Street, and Donal Avenue) (Figure 18). As previously mentioned, the subject property comprises Lots 12, 13, and 14 of Block “B” of the Schmidt Village subdivision, an area of smaller house lots measuring 50’ x 130’ near the California & Nevada Railroad tracks. Much of the rest of the Schmidt Village subdivision consisted of larger “villa” lots of between two and six acres. In addition to the lot lines, streets, and railroads, the subdivision map shows the Schmidt Village School on San Pablo Avenue, as well as several unnamed creeks – labeled as “ravines” on the map.

In June 1897, an Italian immigrant from Milan named Ambrose Rodoni (originally spelled Rodone) purchased Lot 13 of Block B of the Schmidt Village subdivision from George Schmidt. Not long after, he began building a house on the 50’ x 130’ lot. In December 1897, he transferred the property and improve-

\(^\text{11}\) “Postmaster George Schmidt, Now Considered Leading Capitalist,” *Oakland Tribune* (May 5, 1907).
ments to his wife, Virginia Bonnini Rodoni.\textsuperscript{12} It is not known who designed or built the house, though Michael Corbett speculates in his 2006 study that because Rodoni had once worked as a carpenter, that he may have participated in its design and/or construction.\textsuperscript{13} An extensive search for building contracts bearing Rodoni’s name in the \textit{Oakland Tribune} failed to yield any evidence that he hired anyone to build the house, buttressing Corbett’s claim that it was probably designed and built by Rodoni himself.

\begin{figure}[h]
\centering
\includegraphics[width=\textwidth]{schmidt_village_map.png}
\caption{Map of Schmidt Village subdivision, 1896; subject property in blue}
\textit{Source: Contra Costa County Assessor’s Office and the El Cerrito Historical Society}
\end{figure}

\textbf{Ambrose and Virginia Rodoni}

Based on U.S. Census records, newspapers, and passenger lists, it can be established that Ambrose Rodoni was born in 1866 in Lombardy and that he immigrated to the United States in 1887 when he was 21 years old. The spelling of his name varied widely; according to the 1900 Census records his name was

\textsuperscript{12} Contra Costa County Assessor’s Office, as cited in Michael Corbett, \textit{Historic and Architectural Assessment of the Rodoni Family Property, 1715 Elm Street, El Cerrito} (Berkeley, CA: 2006), 6.

\textsuperscript{13} Michael Corbett, \textit{Historic and Architectural Assessment of the Rodoni Family Property, 1715 Elm Street, El Cerrito} (Berkeley, CA: 2006), 3.
spelled “Ambus Rodone.” In city directories and newspaper articles his surname was also commonly spelled “Rodini” and his first name “Ambrogio.” By 1920 he seems to have settled on “Ambrose Rodoni,” which is the spelling used in this HRE.

After immigrating to the United States, Rodoni made his way to California, where he worked at a lumber camp near Cazadero, in Sonoma County. There he met other Italian immigrants, including the three Bonnini brothers. The brothers apparently sent to Italy for their sister Virginia to travel to California to marry their friend Ambrose. Their first child, Mary, was born in November 1894 and the couple married shortly thereafter in 1895. 

The 1900 Census records Ambrose Rodoni as being 33 years old and employed as a farm laborer in Contra Costa County’s Township 7 (El Cerrito). According to the 1900 Census, Ambrose and Virginia had three children: an 18-year old son named Joseph, a 5-year-old daughter named Mary, and a 2-year-old daughter named Josie. Joseph, who had just arrived from Italy and was employed locally as a quarry worker, did not speak English. Mary and Josie were both born in California. If Joseph was actually Ambrose’s son, he must have been the offspring of an earlier marriage or relationship because he was only four years younger than his “mother,” Virginia and if his age is correctly noted on the Census schedules his father would have only been 15 when Joseph was born! More likely, Joseph was a relative who was sponsored by the Rodoni family and the Census enumerator did not understand the relationship.

According to the 1910 Census, Ambrose and Virginia had four more children – all sons: John (born 1902), Joseph (born 1903), Louis (born 1904), and Ernest (born 1907). In 1910, Ambrose, now 44 years old, worked at a nearby rock quarry. The Census schedules indicate that the family lived on Union Street, though no house number was given, indicating the still-rural character of El Cerrito.

Aside from the house, not much is known about the earliest physical characteristics of the Rodoni property, primarily because there are no Sanborn maps dating back this far for this part of Contra Costa County. However, it is known that the Rodoni family purchased the adjoining lot to the south (Lot 14) in 1902. This purchase would have given them control over the unnamed creek and it was probably around this time that they built the stone walls to better-define its channel. Because this part of El Cerrito did not have municipal water until the 1940s, it is certain that the Rodoni family had a well and probably also a tank house by this time. A tank house, a typical feature of rural California during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, was a two or three-story, wood-frame structure with a room below and a water tank made of wood staves above. Elevating the tank as high as possible above ground allowed stored water to be distributed with adequate water pressure.

The earliest graphic depiction of 1715 Elm Street can be found on the 1915 USGS map (Figure 19). The map plainly shows the Rodoni family’s house located just north of the unnamed creek that passes through their property. The map indicates that the surrounding area had been laid out in a semi-regular

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gridiron pattern of streets. Most of the surrounding area – identified as “Schmidt” on the map – remained rural, with very few other houses.

According to the 1915-16 Richmond and Martinez City Directory, the Rodoni family (spelled “Rodini”) lived on Union Street in Schmidtville. Ambrose’s occupation was listed as “laborer” and Virginia kept house. Three children still lived at home, including John, a student; Josie, a box maker; and Mary, an inspector at the Pacific Cartridge Company. Subsequent city directories listed a revolving cast of family members living on and off at the property. Occupations of family members changed almost yearly. The 1920 Census lists Ambrose and Virginia in residence at Union Street, along with four of their sons: John (age 19), a wire painter at a cap works (explosives) factory; Joseph (age 17), a laborer at the same cap works factory; Louis (age 15); and Ernest (age 13). The Census schedules indicate that the property was mortgaged, suggesting that the family had borrowed against it to make improvements or to purchase additional property. In contrast to earlier Census schedules, the 1920 Census recorded that neither Ambrose nor Virginia could speak English.

The 1922 City Directory was the earliest to list the Rodoni property by address (1509 Union Street). Throughout the early 1920s, John, Joseph, Louis, and Ernest continued to live at home with their parents, which at the time was customary for unmarried adult children. Like their father, they were all employed as laborers. By 1923, John, Joseph, and Louis were all employed by the Santa Fe Railroad as car builders in the company’s Richmond car shop. By 1926, John and Joseph had married and moved out of their parents’ house. Between 1926 and 1929, Ernest and Louis remained the only children living at home. According to City Directories, Ernest was employed as an upholsterer (probably in the Santa Fe Railroad’s car shop), and Louis as a carpenter. Ambrose continued to be listed as a laborer. Because no employer was listed, he was likely a day laborer, meaning he worked informally on individual jobs for a variety of indi-

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18 R.L. Polk and Company, Richmond and Contra Costa County Directory (Oakland: various years).
20 R.L. Polk and Company, Richmond and Contra Costa County Directory (Oakland: various years).
individuals and not as an employee of a company.

**Little Italy**

The 1920 Census schedules reveal an increasing concentration of Italian immigrants in north-central El Cerrito, the area then known as “Schmidt” or “Schmidtville.” Whereas the 1900 and 1910 Census schedules revealed an astonishing amount of ethnic diversity in the area, by 1920 of 50 individuals, only six residents in the local area were not Italian or of Italian descent. Most were recent arrivals, many having immigrated to the United States within the previous decade. Nearly all heads-of-household and adult male children were employed as laborers in nearby factories or quarries, or as railroad workers employed by the Santa Fe Railroad. Contemporary newspapers began commenting on the large number of Italians in Schmidtville, and by the 1920s the area was known as “Little Italy.” The Italian community’s business district was centered at the intersection of San Pablo and Potrero avenues. Like Ambrose Rodoni, many came from Lombardy and nearly all were low or unskilled laborers employed by local industries in El Cerrito and nearby Richmond. Employers included several different quarries, Technical Porcelain and China Company (TEPCO), California Cap Works, Metropolitan Match Company, Stauffer Chemical Company, Vulcan Powder Works, the Santa Fe Railroad’s car shop, Standard Oil, and many other firms in the growing industrial belt of western Contra Costa County.²¹

Though most Italians were employed in industry, many apparently held on to aspects of their rural upbringing on weekends and evenings. Some local Italians, including the Rodoni family, pieced together plots of land where they could farm, raise animals, make wine, and can or pickle vegetables and fruit. In addition to preserving Italian folkways, such activities supplemented the resources available to people with meagre incomes.

Many members of El Cerrito’s Italian community were related. Indeed, many came from the same region of Lombardy, near Milan. El Cerrito’s Italians were famously close-knit and many immigrants never learned to speak English – they didn’t need to – most were employed in unskilled or low-skilled jobs where anything beyond rudimentary English was unnecessary. Furthermore, El Cerrito’s immigrant Italians were numerous enough that they could form their own self-contained society, where they could patronize their own businesses, attend their own churches (St. John the Baptist), and socialize at their own clubs (Italian Catholic Federation and the Galileo Club). Winemaking was a major hobby of El Cerrito’s Italian population, so much that streetcar conductors referred to the intersection of San Pablo and Potrero avenues as “Grappa Junction.”²² The name “Little Italy” seems to have adhered to this part of El Cerrito from the 1920s until the 1950s, when widespread suburbanization (which brought in hundreds of non-Italian residents), assimilation of the American-born offspring of Italian immigrants, and intermarriage between members of different ethnic groups, began to dissolve immigrant enclaves like El Cerrito’s Little Italy, and others like it across the United States.

Aside from a strip on either side of San Pablo Avenue, most of the Schmidtville area was still too sparsely developed to be included on the 1926 Sanborn maps for El Cerrito. According to the Contra Costa County Assessor’s records, Virginia and Ambrose Rodoni purchased a third lot – the adjoining lot to the north (Lot 12) – which enlarged the subject property to its present dimensions of 150’ x 130’.²³ As mentioned

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²² Ibid., 55.
previously, larger rural lots were still plentiful on the fringes of the urbanized core of the Bay Area during the early twentieth century. Even in subdivisions where lots measured only 25’ wide, people would purchase multiple adjoining lots to provide space for a house, a small orchard or vineyard, pasture, and/or space for row crops (along with associated outbuildings). This trend, coupled with El Cerrito’s late start toward development, perpetuated El Cerrito’s semi-rural character well into the middle of the twentieth century. And in the years before widespread automobile ownership, these “weekend ranchers” could still easily commute to jobs in nearby cities via transit, including the East Shore & Suburban Railway, which ran from the Alameda/Contra Costa County line, along San Pablo Avenue, and then down MacDonald Avenue into downtown Richmond.

1930 Sanborn Map
The 1930 Sanborn Fire Insurance Company’s 1930 map series for Richmond includes much of adjoining El Cerrito, including the subject property (Figure 20). This earliest known detailed depiction of the subject property shows conditions similar to what exist today. The map shows the Rodoni house at the center of the property, with the bulk of the other structures directly behind the house, suggesting that the outbuildings were constructed before the Rodoni family acquired the adjoining lots. Visible behind the house are a one-story garage, a tank house, a windmill, a well, and a one-story shed that appears to enclose a portion of the creek. The map indicates that the surrounding Schmidtville/Little Italy district remained semi-rural, with only six houses on the west side of Union Street (now Elm Street) – only one more than had been shown on the 1915 USGS map. Nearly every residential property had a tank house, indicating that municipal water service had not yet arrived in this part of El Cerrito. Further away from San Pablo Avenue, the area was even more rural, with dairies, chicken ranches, and nurseries appearing on the 1930 Sanborn maps.

Figure 20. Section of Map 319, Sanborn Fire Insurance Maps, Richmond, California, 1930
Source: San Francisco Public Library; annotated by Christopher VerPlanck

Historic Preservation Consulting
Ver Planck
Published the same year, the 1930 Census schedules reveal that all of the Rodoni children had moved out of the house, with the exception of Ernest (age 23), who was employed in construction. By this time both Virginia (age 54) and Ambrose (age 64) were retired. They owned their property free and clear, which at that time was valued at $800. The 1930 Census schedules indicate that the Schmidtville/Little Italy area remained largely Italian and Italian-American in origin. Of 50 individuals listed on Sheet 6B, only 13 did not have Italian surnames.24

In 1940, City Directories indicate that the address of the property had changed to 1715 Union Street. The 1940 Census schedules indicate that Ambrose (age 73) continued to live at 1715 Union Street. Virginia Rodoni had died in 1938 at the age of 62.25 Living with Ambrose was his son Louis (age 35), a railroad worker. The property was valued at $1,000, about average for the neighborhood. The 1940 Census schedules indicated that only four out of the total 15 heads of household had non-Italian surnames, indicating that the ethnic character of Little Italy continued to persist despite the influx of war workers from across the nation during the late 1930s.26

Building records indicate that there were very few, if any, changes made to the Rodoni property between 1897 and 1940, except for the construction of two small additions at the rear of the house and possibly the garage, ca. 1930. Ca. 1944, Louis Rodoni married a woman with two daughters from a previous marriage. To house his new family, Louis remodeled the interior of the house, installing a new kitchen, a new front door, and carpeting throughout the main floor level. The property was also hooked up to municipal water for the first time.27 In 1949, Ernest Rodoni, recently divorced from his wife, moved back to the family home. To house Ernest and his new wife Yolanda, a portion of the basement was remodeled into living quarters.28

1951 Sanborn Map
The 1951 Sanborn maps show few changes to the Rodoni property since the 1930 Sanborn maps had been published (Figure 21). The maps of the surrounding area do indicate that suburbanization had begun to overtake El Cerrito, including most of the Schmidtville/Little Italy area. For the most part, the remaining ranches and nurseries were confined to foothills of the Berkeley Hills. In contrast, most of the level land near San Pablo Avenue had sprouted hundreds of single-family homes. Indeed, the 1951 Sanborn maps indicate that the majority of the small ranches shown on the 1930s maps had been replaced with post-war tract houses. Of the older houses that remained, most sat on smaller lots, indicating that their lots had been subdivided. In addition, most of the tank houses, windmills, stables and other typical rural outbuildings had been demolished. In contrast to its neighbors, 1715 Elm Street remained a rural holdout, with its large lot, tank house, and agricultural activities all in place.

24 U.S. Department of Commerce, Bureau of the Census, Fifteenth Census of the United States: Contra Costa County Seventh Township – El Cerrito City, Enumeration District 7-22, Sheet 6B.
In 1956, Ambrose Rodoni conveyed 1715 Elm Street to his son, Louis Rodoni. That following year, in the summer of 1957, he died at the age of 90. According to his children, Ambrose lived most of his life in El Cerrito’s Little Italy without ever learning English. Instead, he communicated with his friends and family in his own Lombard dialect or with non-Italians in broken English. The fact that Rodoni never had to learn English attests both to the high concentration of Italians in this part of El Cerrito, as well as the strength and resilience of the Italian culture.

Until he retired in 1969 at the age of 65, Louis Rodoni worked at the Santa Fe Railroad’s car shop in Richmond. Prior to his retirement, Louis does not seem to have made any significant changes to the Rodoni property, though the house’s windows were replaced with aluminum sliders probably sometime in the late 1960s. When the Contra Costa County Assessor visited the property in 1968, the tank house and windmill were both still standing. They were probably demolished not long after and the well house constructed from materials salvaged from the tank house. At some point in the 1970s or 1980s, Louis built the existing metal-frame and fiberglass shed. Between his retirement in 1969 and his death in 2002, Louis grew vegetables and fruit on the property – selling some from a roadside stand on Elm Street. He also grew grapes for winemaking. Louis Rodoni died in 2002 at the age of 98. The property was inherited by his two step-daughters, who conveyed it to Lincoln Trust Company of Fairfield, California. Lincoln Trust planned to clear the site and construct condominiums on the property. In 2003, Eddie Biggs Development acquired the property to build condominiums.

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30 Ibid.
C. Summary of Alterations for 1715 Elm Street

Building records are scarce for 1715 Elm Street. There is no original building permit for the house or any of the other structures on the site. The earliest permits on file for the property, which date to 1907 and 1912, probably record the construction of the two small shed-roofed additions at the rear of the house. Permit applications from the 1940s indicate that the Rodoni family completed an interior remodel, which included a new kitchen, carpeting, and other unspecified changes to the first floor level of the house. In 1949, the Rodonis converted the rear portion of the basement into living quarters for Ernest Rodoni. The most substantial alterations took place after 1968, when the original wood windows were replaced with aluminum sliders and the tank house and windmill demolished. During the 1970s a new well house was built above the well; it appears to have been built out of materials salvaged from the tank house. Louis Rodoni built a fiberglass-clad shed at an unknown date between the house and the garage.

D. Chain of Title for 1715 Elm Street

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<th>Document Reference</th>
<th>Date</th>
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<th>Grantee</th>
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<td>1897</td>
<td>George Schmidt</td>
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<td>Ambrose Rodoni</td>
<td>Virginia Rodoni Lot 13, Block B, Schmidt Village Tract</td>
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<td>Ambrose and Virginia Rodoni Lot 14, Block B, Schmidt Village Tract</td>
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<td>Ambrose Rodoni Lot 13, Block B, Schmidt Village Tract</td>
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<td>Ambrose Rodoni</td>
<td>Louis Rodoni Lots 12, 13, &amp; 14, Block B, Schmidt Village Tract</td>
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VII. Evaluation of Historical Status

VerPlanck Historic Preservation Consulting evaluated 1715 Elm Street to determine if it is individually eligible for listing in the California Register of Historical Resources (California Register), which is the threshold for determining whether a property is a historical resource under Section 21084.1 of the California Environmental Quality Act (CEQA). As mentioned in the Introduction, Michael Corbett evaluated the property for eligibility in 2006. He concluded that the property was eligible for listing under California Register Criterion 1 (Events) for its association with the history of early El Cerrito, as the third-oldest dwelling in the city, as well as a property associated with the now-vanished community of “Little Italy.” The period of significance is 1897 (the date of construction of the Rodoni house) until 1956, “when Little Italy began to be merged into the larger community.” Corbett did not find the property eligible under Criterion 2 (Persons). He did not evaluate it for significance under Criterion 3 (Design/Construction) or Criterion 4 (Information Potential). The following evaluation is our own independent analysis based on our own research and conclusions informed by the primary research in Corbett’s report.

A. California Register of Historical Resources

The California Register is an authoritative guide to significant architectural, archaeological, and historical resources in the State of California. Resources can be listed in the California Register through a number of methods. State Historical Landmarks and National Register-eligible properties (both listed and formal determinations of eligibility) are automatically listed. Properties can also be nominated to the California Register by local governments, private organizations, or citizens. These include properties identified in historical resource surveys with Status Codes of 1 to 5 and resources designated as local landmarks or listed by city or county ordinance. The eligibility criteria used by the California Register are closely based on those developed by the National Park Service for the National Register of Historic Places (National Register). In order to be eligible for listing in the California Register a property must be demonstrated to be significant under one or more of the following criteria:

- **Criterion 1 (Event):** Resources that are associated with events that have made a significant contribution to the broad patterns of local or regional history, or the cultural heritage of California or the United States.

- **Criterion 2 (Person):** Resources that are associated with the lives of persons important to local, California, or national history.

- **Criterion 3 (Design/Construction):** Resources that embody the distinctive characteristics of a type, period, region, or method of construction, or represent the work of a master, or possess high artistic values.

- **Criterion 4 (Information Potential):** Resources or sites that have yielded or have the potential to yield information important to the prehistory or history of the local area, California or the nation.

Michael Corbett’s evaluation was prepared at the request of Douglas Herring & Associates and not the City of El Cerrito, the property owner, or other local body. It has not been submitted to the Northwest Information Center at Sonoma State University, the local repository of the California Historical Resources Information System. As such the property has not been assigned a California Register Status.
Code. In the following sections VerPlanck Historic Preservation Consulting examines the property under each of the four criteria and then assesses its integrity under the seven aspects utilized by the California Register.

**Criterion 1 (Events)**

As mentioned above, Michael Corbett concluded in his 2006 report that 1715 Elm Street appears eligible for listing in the California Register under Criterion 1. The following section is extracted from Corbett’s report:

Under criterion 1, the Rodoni property “is associated with events that have made a significant contribution to the broad patterns of local...history.” The property is one of the few surviving elements of the pioneer period of El Cerrito before 1907. As such, it represents an important era in the development of the city. The property represents the formative stage in the development of El Cerrito, when the land was surveyed but few people lived on it. As El Cerrito grew, the old landscape represented by this property almost completely disappeared. The Rodoni property, with its large parcel of three lots and its large garden/small farm character is an exemplary representative of this era.

The property also represents the ethnic history of El Cerrito. The Rodoni family, which began developing the property in 1897, and occupied it until Louis Rodoni died in 2002, were Italian. The first generation, Ambrose and Virginia came from Italy in 1887 and about 1893, respectively. Their six children grew up in the house. Most moved out as they married; Louis, who married late, stayed in the house his whole life. Ambrose and Virginia only spoke Lombard, an Italian dialect from the region around Milan. The children spoke a form of their parent’s (sic) language and English, having attended local schools.

As many attempted, the family recreated a piece of Italy in El Cerrito with its gardens and fruit trees and running water. For decades, the children and grandchildren returned weekly for meals largely made from the garden. The family made its own wine and canned fruit in the basement.

In the place they created and in the lives they lived, the family belonged to the El Cerrito community of Little Italy, an area more or less between Hill and Potrero streets and from San Pablo Avenue eastward for a few blocks. Located within this area, the family had friends in the neighborhood, including Virginia’s family, the Boninns through their back fence at 1710 Liberty Street. They shopped on San Pablo and socialized in the neighborhood.

As part of the Little Italy community, the Rodoni’s were typical Italians in their work. Like many, Ambrose and one of his sons worked in local quarries. Ambrose also described himself in census records and directories as, variously, a farm laborer, a carpenter, and a laborer. His jobs and many of the jobs of his sons were described by the census as “working on own account” – they were not employees but self-employed day laborers. In this way, their working lives represented their status as immigrants at the bottom of the social and economic hierarchy. In the second generation, like other Italians,
Louis and his brothers sought and generally achieved employment positions in big companies with more security and better pay.

A distinctive aspect of this property is the link that can be made between the people who lived there and the work they did as Italian immigrants. While written records are rarely if ever available to prove such things, it is highly probable that Ambrose himself, as a quarry worker, built the stone walls that line the creek. He and his sons previously also made most of the improvements to the property. Altogether, the property represents the community of Little Italy in El Cerrito.

The property is significant from 1897 when Ambrose and Virginia Rodoni bought the property and built the house. It ends in the 1950s when Little Italy declined as a distinctive cultural entity and merged into the larger community. For simplicity in a situation where any particular year would be arbitrary, we will say that the period of significance ends in 1956, fifty years ago. We concur with Corbett’s argument that 1715 Elm Street appears eligible for listing in the California Register under Criterion 1, as a very early residential property in the city and as a property closely associated with El Cerrito’s Little Italy. 1715 Elm Street is clearly a rare remnant of El Cerrito’s pioneer period, which ends in 1906. As a community that got such a late start because of uncertainty over Rancho San Pablo land titles, El Cerrito has very few nineteenth-century buildings. According to the Contra Costa County Assessor, there are only four buildings in the city with construction dates preceding 1900, including: 6606 Schmidt Lane (1895), 7127 Blake Street (1896), 1715 Elm Street (1897), and 1332 Navellier Lane (1898). If these construction dates are accurate, 1715 Elm Street is the third-oldest building in El Cerrito. Furthermore, Assessor parcel data indicates that there are only seven more extant buildings in El Cerrito built between 1900 and 1906, meaning that there are only 11 known properties in El Cerrito dating from the city’s pioneer period.

We also agree that 1715 Elm Street is significant for its association with El Cerrito’s Little Italy, a once-thriving immigrant enclave centered at the intersection of San Pablo and Potrero avenues. Prior to the Second World War, Little Italy consisted of around 100 houses east of San Pablo Avenue, between Hill Street to the north and Schmidt Lane to the south. Its commercial district was centered on San Pablo Avenue, with several other businesses located along Potrero Avenue. A tight-knit community of mostly Lombard-speaking immigrants, many of whom worked at low-skilled jobs in local quarries and other industries, Little Italy had its own shops, churches, and social organizations. El Cerrito’s Italian immigrants did not need to learn English – though some did – and most continued to live according to their own cultural norms and traditions, including growing much of their own fruit and vegetables, as well as winemaking. Little Italy thrived from around 1920 until the early-to-mid-1950s, when accelerating suburban development essentially crowded out and absorbed the remnants of the formerly semi-rural community. Today there are few physical remnants of El Cerrito’s Little Italy.

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Criterion 2 (Persons)

We also concur with Michael Corbett’s findings that 1715 Elm Street does not appear eligible for listing in the California Register under Criterion 2. Corbett writes: “Although the Rodonis were long-time residents of El Cerrito and its Little Italy community, none meet the guidelines for individually significant persons, as discussed in National Register Bulletin 15.”

VerPlanck Historic Preservation Consulting researched local newspapers and census records to confirm that no members of the Rodoni family were important to local, California, or national history. Though active members of their community – and Louis Rodoni was well-known locally for his lush gardens and farm stand – the Rodonis did not appear to have played an important role in local, regional, or state culture, politics, or any other area that would qualify the property under Criterion 2.

Criterion 3 (Design/Construction)

Michel Corbett did not evaluate 1715 Elm Street for eligibility for listing in the California Register under Criterion 3. VerPlanck Historic Preservation Consulting evaluated the property as a cultural landscape, as well as the Rodoni house for eligibility under this criterion. In the sections below we have separated our analysis into two categories: the property as a whole and the Rodoni House itself.

Rodoni Property

As a rare remnant of El Cerrito’s rural past, 1715 Elm Street is best understood as a vernacular cultural landscape. According to the Secretary of the Interior’s Standards for the Treatment of Historic Properties with Guidelines for the Treatment of Cultural Landscapes, a historic vernacular cultural landscape is:

A landscape that evolved through use by the people whose activities or occupancy shaped it. Through social or cultural attitudes of an individual, a family, or a community, the landscape reflects the physical, biological, and cultural character of everyday lives. Function plays a significant role in vernacular landscapes. This can be a farm complex or a district of historic farmsteads along a river valley. Examples include rural historic districts and agricultural landscapes.33

Though many manmade sites may fall within the category of a vernacular cultural landscape, in order to be eligible for listing in the California Register under Criterion 3, it “must embody the distinctive characteristics” of a type or a period. Approaching the property from either side, the Rodoni property clearly stands out from its postwar suburban context. The unexpected break in the street wall announces that there is something different about 1715 Elm Street. Upon closer examination, the property bears the distinctive hallmarks of a small ranch or farm, with its once carefully tilled ground and irrigation system, its well house and other outbuildings, its untended fruit trees and grape arbors, and its stone-bound creek. The only elements missing from the property that would enhance its value as a historic cultural landscape are the tank house and windmill (both demolished after 1968). Consultation with the El Cerrito Historical Society has failed to reveal any properties comparable to 1715 Elm Street in El Cerrito with the exception of 1332 Navellier Lane, another pioneer-era dwelling surrounded by agricultural land and open space at the base of the Berkeley Hills, less than a mile away from the subject property.

**Rodoni House**

In terms of its design, the Rodoni house is a hybrid of two different common vernacular housing types commonly built in the East Bay between 1890 and 1910 – the Queen Anne Cottage and the Neoclassic Rowhouse. Mostly it is a basic Queen Anne Cottage, with its angled bay window, shingled gables, and turned porch posts. The Oakland Planning Department’s 1978 publication *Rehab Right* describes this type, which is illustrated in Figure 22:

The Queen Anne Cottage is a one-story building practically consumed by an oversized gable. A veritable billboard for textural effect, the ornate gable may be clothed in decorative shingles, framed with intricate bargeboard, pierced by flashed glass windows, stamped with a sunburst, and topped with a proud finial. A less elaborate gable might only have scalloped shingles, a perimeter of dentils, and a modest topknot.  

In regard to its façade organization and its ornament, the Rodoni house is a modest example of a Queen Anne Cottage, though it is not nearly as ornate as its typical urban counterparts.

With its hipped roof and modest detailing, the Rodoni house also displays some characteristics of the Neoclassic Rowhouse style, another common vernacular housing type in the East Bay. It is described in *Rehab Right* as “a one-story house on a raised foundation, with a hipped roof and dormer window” (Figure 23). 1715 Elm Street does share some superficial characteristics with the prototypical Neoclassic Rowhouse, especially its pronounced hipped roof, chamfered bay window, and lack of extraneous ornament. This type only began to become popular around 1895 and its form may have only tangentially influenced the builder of 1715 Elm Street. There are many examples of this later building type in El Cerrito, though if they have any ornament at all it is either Classical or Craftsman in origin and not Queen Anne.

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34 City of Oakland Planning Department, *Rehab Right* (Oakland: City of Oakland, 1978), 12.
35 Ibid., 19.

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**Figure 22. “Queen Anne Cottage,” from Rehab Right**
*Source: Oakland Planning Department*

**Figure 23. “Neoclassic Rowhouse,” from Rehab Right**
*Source: Oakland Planning Department*
In summary, the Rodoni house does not appear to be a particularly *distinctive* example of a recognizable building type. To qualify for listing in the California Register, it should be a *distinctive* example, or other words, different from other comparable examples. In our opinion, the Rodoni house is a hybrid type that does not embody the distinctive characteristics of a particular type, period, or method of construction. Similarly, as a house that was built cheaply, practically, and probably by its owner, the Rodoni house does not appear eligible under Criterion 3 either as the “work of a master” or as a resource that “possesses high artistic value.”

**Criterion 4 (Information Potential)**
Criterion 4 typically refers to archaeological resources. Though archaeological investigation is beyond the scope of this report, the California Historic Resources Information System does not report any archaeological resources on the subject property or within its immediate vicinity. However, as a former agricultural property it is to be expected that historic-period features and materials may be present. In addition, prehistoric Ohlone settlements were often located near creeks in the San Francisco Bay Area. It is possible that Native American artifacts could be present on the site.

**B. Integrity**
To be eligible for listing in the California Register a property must not only be demonstrated to be significant under the eligibility criteria, it must also retain integrity. Similar to the National Register, the California Register recognizes seven aspects, or qualities, that, in various combinations, define integrity. To retain integrity, a property must possess several, and usually most, of the aspects, which are described below:

**Location:** The place where the historic property was constructed or the place where the historic event occurred.

The Rodoni property remains in the same location that it was developed. Therefore it retains integrity of “location.”

**Design:** The combination of elements that create the form, plan, space, structure, and style of a property.

**Rodoni Property**
The Rodoni property retains its historic layout, with the house at the center, the creek separating the house from the southern third of the property, fruit trees along the south side of the house and along the western fence line, and most of the rest of the property set aside for row crops and viticulture. The relationship of the house to the creek, the garage, and to the areas formerly cultivated is reflective of the essential spatial characteristics associated with this property type – a small California ranch dating to the late nineteenth/early twentieth centuries. Several structures have been demolished and others built since the period of significance, including the tank house and windmill, which were both demolished after 1968. The well house appears to have been built from materials salvaged from the demolished tank house. It was built after the period of significance and is therefore a non-contributing feature. The fiberglass shed, which probably dates to the 1970s or 1980s, is also a non-contributing feature, but as Michael Corbett points out: “Although technically non-contributing….they (the well house and the shed) maintain the general character of the yard as a place with small, secondary buildings.”
Rodoni House
The Rodoni house has undergone several incompatible alterations, chief among them the replacement of the original wood windows with aluminum sliders ca. 1969. As part of this work the window openings appear to have been changed to match the standardized window sizes and, possibly, the historic Victorian window trim removed. It is not certain that it had decorative window trim but even a simple rural Queen Anne dwelling such as this would likely have had decorative millwork surrounding the doors and windows, at least on the primary facade. The insertion of the off-the-shelf aluminum windows likely required resizing the original window openings, and this may have resulted in the window trim being removed and replaced with the plain wood moldings that exist today. The changes to the interior and the replacement of the front door occurred within the period of significance and therefore do not reflect a diminishment of integrity.

In summary, the Rodoni house and property have undergone alterations that diminish their integrity. Nonetheless, both still retain the majority of their original form, plan, space, structure, and the property is quite recognizable as a rural property type from its period of significance. Therefore, the property and house retain integrity of “design.”

Setting: The physical environment of a historic property.

The area surrounding the Rodoni property has undergone tremendous change between 1897, when the house was first built, and 1956, the end of the period of significance. However, the majority of those changes occurred during the period of significance, including the transformation of the surrounding blocks from small ranches and older homes into postwar suburban tracts. Since 1956, some remaining semi-rural holdouts were redeveloped with multi-family housing (particularly across the street), but though the surrounding properties are much denser than the subject property, most are similarly low-scale and do not radically impair the property’s setting. The property therefore retains integrity of “setting.”

Materials: The physical elements that were combined or deposited during a particular period of time and in a particular pattern or configuration to form a historic property.

Similar to the aspect of design, the primary impacts to materials including the demolition of the tank house and windmill after 1968 and the replacement of the Rodoni house’s wood windows with aluminum around the same time. Otherwise, the historic materials of the property and the house are all still present. On balance the Rodoni property retains integrity of “materials.”

Workmanship: The physical evidence of the crafts of a particular culture or people during any given period in history or prehistory.

The Rodoni house and the other outbuildings are all built of simple “off-the-shelf” materials assembled by hand on-site. Examples of skilled workmanship include the exterior finishes of the house (including the decorative shingle patterns). The stone walls of the creek bed, though very simple are dry-laid without any mortar; they form another example of workmanship on the Rodoni property. The Rodoni property retains integrity of “workmanship.”
Feeling: The expression of the aesthetic or historic sense of a particular period of time.

Though the Rodoni property is missing its historic tank house and windmill, and has been untended for a decade, the property still clearly conveys its historic purpose and use. Family members and visitors from the period of significance would have no trouble recognizing the property – a standard test of the aspect of feeling. The Rodoni property retains integrity of “feeling.”

Association: The direct line between an important historic event or person and a historic property.

The Rodoni property is possibly the best remaining example of a residential property in El Cerrito that represents the history of the city’s once-thriving Little Italy neighborhood and as a rural, agricultural property from the Pioneer Period of El Cerrito. The property retains integrity of “association.”

Summary
Based on the analysis in this HRE, 1715 Elm Street appears eligible for listing in the California Register under Criterion 1 (Events) and Criterion 3 (Design/Construction). It does not appear eligible for listing under Criterion 2 (Persons). Evaluation under Criterion 4 (Information Potential) is beyond the scope of this report.

VIII. Evaluation of Project-specific Impacts
This section analyzes the historic status of the subject property and the impacts of the proposed project on the historic resource. The project description is derived from architectural and landscape plans prepared by LCA Architects titled “Elm Street Condominiums,” dated August 23, 2013.

A. Project Description

The proposed project would create a total of 15 residential units on the 18,465 square-foot property. The Rodoni house would be relocated to the southwest corner of the property and rehabilitated as a two-bedroom residential unit. The remaining 14 units, comprising three one-bedroom units and 11 two-bedroom units, would be located within a new three-story, concrete-podium, wood-frame building that would occupy the northern two-thirds of the site. The new structure would have a 15-space parking garage, bicycle parking, trash and recycling, one one-bedroom unit, and one two-bedroom unit on the first floor level; and one one-bedroom unit, and five two-bedroom units on both the second and third floor levels. Vehicular access to the garage would be provided by a new driveway off Elm Street. The new building would be set back 10’ from the adjoining property to the north, 15’ from the properties to the west, and 13’-7” from the relocated Rodoni house. In terms of its design, the new building would be designed in a contemporary version of the Craftsman style, with a false gable roof and extruded gable-roofed pavilions, cement fiberboard siding designed to imitate wood siding, double-hung vinyl windows with fiber cement trim designed to imitate wood windows and trim, and Craftsman-style wood trellises to shelter the garage entrance, the main pedestrian entrance, and the terrace.

The Rodoni House would be rehabilitated in compliance with the Secretary of the Interior’s Standards. The existing wood siding, shingles, and trim would be retained and preserved prior to repainting. A new wood door would replace the existing 1940s-era door. In addition, the non-historic aluminum sliders would be replaced with double-hung wood windows in keeping with what was used originally. The existing porch and other decorative trim on the primary façade would be retained and preserved prior to
The non-historic porch on the rear elevation would be demolished and replaced with a new porch and stair. The existing asphalt shingle roofing would be retained. The interior of the dwelling, which retains little historic integrity, would be reconfigured and refinished.

Landscaping, consisting of turf, trees, and shrubs, and hardscape features, would be used to enhance the unbuilt portions of the site. Street trees, including pear and southern magnolia, would line the eastern property line in front of the new building. Screen trees, including bay laurel and fruiting olive, would line the north, west, and a portion of the south property lines. A turf lawn surrounded by a concrete walkway would occupy the southeast corner of the site, in front of the Rodoni House. The area surrounding the lawn would feature edible herb planting beds and fruit trees, including lemon, kumquat, persimmon, dwarf apple, apricot, and plum. A pair of flowering accent trees would flank the entrance to the restored Rodoni house. Various native and exotic shrubs, including manzanita, camellia, California lilac, coffeeberry, Mexican sage, and others would be used throughout the site. Hardscape features would include several outdoor patios, walkways, and the restored creek. A decomposed granite patio with raised herb beds would be built along the east side of the property, just north of the creek channel. A brick-paved walkway would be located between the patio/herb garden and the new building. A wood-plank bridge would connect the brick walkway with the turf lawn and concrete walkway in front of the Rodoni House. The stone-lined creek channel that runs through the site today would be retained and preserved as part of the project’s landscape.

B. Status of Existing Property as a Historical Resource

According to Section 15064.5 (a) of CEQA, a “historical resource” is defined as belonging to at least one of the following three categories:

- A resource listed in, or determined to be eligible by the State Historical Resources Commission, for listing in the California Register of Historical Resources (Pub. Res. Code SS5024.1, Title 14 CCR, Section 4850 et seq.);

- A resource included in a local register of historical resources, as defined in Section 5020.1(k) of the Public Resources Code or identified as significant in an historical resource survey meeting the requirements of section 5024.1 (g) of the Public Resources Code, shall be presumed to be historically or culturally significant. Public agencies must treat any such resource as significant unless the preponderance of evidence demonstrates that it is not historically or culturally significant;

- Any object, building, structure, site, area, place, record, or manuscript which a lead agency determines to be historically significant or significant in the architectural, engineering, scientific, economic, agricultural, educational, social, political, military, or cultural annals of California may be considered to be an historical resource, provided the lead agency’s determination is supported by substantial evidence in light of the whole record. Generally, a resource shall be considered by the lead agency to be “historically significant” if the resource meets the criteria for listing on the California Register of Historical Resources (Pub. Res. Code SS5024.1, Title 14 CCR, Section 4852).

As mentioned previously, the 1715 Elm Street property does not have any formal historic status according to the California Historical Resource Information System. In addition, the City of El Cerrito does not maintain an official register of historical resources. This HRE finds the Rodoni property eligible for listing
in the California Register under Criterion 1 and 3. If the lead agency (the City of El Cerrito) concurs with the findings of this report, the property would be a historical resource under Section 15064.5 (a) of CEQA.

C. Determination of Significant Adverse Effect under CEQA

According to CEQA, a “project with an effect that may cause a substantial adverse change in the significance of an historic resource is a project that may have a significant effect on the environment.” Substantial adverse change is defined as: “physical demolition, destruction, relocation, or alteration of the resource or its immediate surroundings such that the significance of an historic resource would be materially impaired.” The significance of an historical resource is materially impaired when a project “demolishes or materially alters in an adverse manner those physical characteristics of an historical resource that convey its historical significance and that justify its eligibility for inclusion in the California Register...as determined by a lead agency for purposes of CEQA.”

D. Analysis of the Project for Compliance with the Secretary of the Interior’s Standards

The Secretary of the Interior’s Standards for Rehabilitation and Illustrated Guidelines for Rehabilitating Historic Buildings (the Rehabilitation Standards and the Guidelines, respectively) provide guidance for reviewing work to historic properties. Developed by the National Park Service for reviewing certified rehabilitation tax credit projects, the Standards have been adopted by local government bodies across the country for reviewing proposed work on historic properties under local preservation ordinances. The Rehabilitation Standards are a useful analytic tool for understanding and describing the potential impacts of changes to historical resources.

Conformance with the Rehabilitation Standards does not determine whether a project would cause a substantial adverse change in the significance of a historical resource under CEQA. Rather, projects that comply with the Standards benefit from a regulatory presumption that they would have a less-than-significant adverse impact on a historical resource. Projects that do not comply with the Rehabilitation Standards may or may not cause a substantial adverse change in the significance of an historical resource and would require further analysis to determine whether the historical resource would be “materially impaired” by the project under CEQA Guidelines 15064.5(b).

Rehabilitation is the only one of the four treatments outlined in the Standards (the others are Preservation, Restoration, and Reconstruction) that allows for the construction of an addition or other alteration to accommodate a change in use or program. The first step in analyzing a project’s compliance with the Rehabilitation Standards is to identify the resource’s character-defining features, including charac-

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36 CEQA Guidelines subsection 15064.5(b).
37 CEQA Guidelines subsection 15064.5(b)(1).
38 CEQA Guidelines subsection 15064.5(b)(2).
39 U.S. Department of Interior National Park Service Cultural Resources, Preservation Assistance Division, Secretary of the Interior’s Standards for Rehabilitation and Illustrated Guidelines for Rehabilitating Historic Buildings, 1992. The Standards, revised in 1992, were codified as 36 CFR Part 68.3 in the July 12, 1995 Federal Register (Vol. 60, No. 133). The revision replaces the 1978 and 1983 versions of 36 CFR 68 entitled The Secretary of the Interior’s Standards for Historic Preservation Projects. The 36 CFR 68.3 Standards are applied to all grant-in-aid development projects assisted through the National Historic Preservation Fund. Another set of Standards, 36 CFR 67.7, focuses on “certified historic structures” as defined by the IRS Code of 1986. The Standards in 36 CFR 67.7 are used primarily when property owners are seeking certification for federal tax benefits. The two sets of Standards vary slightly, but the differences are primarily technical and non-substantive in nature. The Guidelines, however, are not codified in the Federal Register.
40 CEQA Guidelines subsection 15064.5(b) (3).
41 Ibid., 63.
teristics such as design, materials, detailing, and spatial relationships. Once the property’s character-defining features have been identified, it is essential to devise a project approach that protects and maintains these important materials and features – meaning that the work involves the “least degree of intervention” and that important features and materials are safeguarded throughout the duration of construction. It is critical to ensure that new work does not result in the permanent removal, destruction, or radical alteration of any significant character-defining features.

It is important to note that the Rehabilitation Standards do not prevent modifications or limited alteration of historic structures or landscape features. The Rehabilitation Standards do allow for the modification of historic structures and landscapes where necessary, so long as the material integrity of the property is not permanently impaired.

The following paragraphs evaluate the proposed project for compliance with each of the ten Rehabilitation Standards. For aspects of the project that may impact landscape features, we apply the Secretary of the Interior’s Standards for the Treatment of Historic Properties with Guidelines for the Treatment of Cultural Landscapes. Where the proposed project complies with the Standard in question, we summarize the beneficial or neutral impacts for the project as a whole. Where the proposed project does not comply, we have broken down the analysis into subsections corresponding to each component of the project (relocation and rehabilitation of the Rodoni House and new construction on the balance of the site) because in many cases only one of the components of the proposed project may fail to comply with a given Rehabilitation Standard.

**Rehabilitation Standard 1:** A property will be used as it was historically or be given a new use that requires minimal change to its distinctive materials, features, spaces and spatial relationships.

The proposed project would convert a single-family residential property with agricultural ancillary uses into a multiple family residential property. Although residential use is not by itself incompatible with the subject property, the introduction of a new multi-family residential building would result in the destruction of the former vernacular cultural landscape, resulting in substantial changes to its distinctive materials, features, spaces, and spatial relationships.

In summary, the proposed project does not comply with Rehabilitation Standard 1.

**Rehabilitation Standard 2:** The historic character of a property will be retained and preserved. The removal of distinctive materials or alteration of features, spaces and spatial relationships that characterize the property will be avoided.

The proposed project, which would relocate the Rodoni house and replace the existing vernacular cultural landscape on the northern two-thirds of the property with a new residential building, would unquestionably alter the existing spatial relationships of the Rodoni property. However, the two most important historic features of the property, the Rodoni house and the stone-lined creek channel, would be retained and restored, significantly reducing the project’s effects on historic materials or features.

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42 Ibid.
**Rodoni House**
The relocated Rodoni House would be rehabilitated as part of the proposed project. Its exterior would be restored to its appearance during the period of significance. No distinctive materials or features would be removed from the building.

**Rodoni Property**
The proposed project would relocate the Rodoni house from its original location at the center of the property to its southwest corner. The Rehabilitation Guidelines discourage “Removing or relocating historic buildings on a site or in a complex of related historic structures – such as a mill complex or a farm – thus diminishing the historic character of the site or complex.” 43 On the other hand, the California Register Guidelines do not discourage relocating a California Register-eligible property if it will prevent its demolition. 44 Though relocating the house would alter the property’s spatial relationships, the Rodoni house would remain on the property, maintaining an important historical nexus. Furthermore, its already compromised setting would be enhanced by compatible landscaping consisting of flowering fruit trees and other species characteristic of the property during the period of significance. The Rodoni house would be the only structure on the southern third of the property and it would be separated from the new building by the restored historic creek channel, giving it a natural buffer. Though it would be set back farther from the street than it is now, this configuration is not uncommon for properties of this type. In rural and once-rural parts of Contra Costa County like El Cerrito, older farm houses like the Rodoni house were sometimes placed at the rear of the property in order to free up space for a garden or barn at the front of the property.

In summary, the proposed project substantially complies with Rehabilitation Standard 2.

**Rehabilitation Standard 3:** Each property will be recognized as a physical record of its time, place and use. Changes that create a false sense of historical development, such as adding conjectural features or elements from other historic properties, will not be undertaken.

The proposed project would not add any elements that would create a false sense of historical development. Nor would it add any conjectural features or elements from other historic properties. The project drawings indicate that the non-historic aluminum slider windows and wood door would be replaced with compatible counterparts. Though what is depicted on the drawings appear compatible, best practice should entail both a) examining physical evidence inside the walls of the Rodoni house to determine the original extent of the windows, and b) searching local archives for a historic photograph to determine exactly what type of windows and doors were originally used. If physical evidence is inconclusive or historic photographs are not available, it would be acceptable to examine comparable, intact properties built during the same period as the Rodoni house to inform the appearance of the replacement windows.

Provided that these steps are taken, the proposed project would comply with Rehabilitation Standard 3.

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Rehabilitation Standard 4: Changes to a property that have acquired historic significance in their own right will be retained and preserved.

None of the changes that occurred after the end of the period of significance – the well house, shed, and addition of aluminum windows to the Rodoni house – have gained significance in their own right. Their demolition would not adversely affect the property.

In summary, the proposed project complies with Rehabilitation Standard 4.

Rehabilitation Standard 5: Distinctive materials, features, finishes and construction techniques or examples of craftsmanship that characterize a property will be preserved.

According to the project drawings, the exterior of the Rodoni house would be restored to its historic appearance. All historic siding, shingles, and porch and cornice trim – mostly concentrated on the primary façade – would be retained and preserved. The interior of the dwelling would be remodeled but it has already been significantly altered and no longer retains integrity.

In summary, the proposed project complies with Rehabilitation Standard 5.

Rehabilitation Standard 6: Deteriorated historic features will be repaired rather than replaced. Where the severity of deterioration requires replacement of a distinctive feature, the new feature will match the old in design, color, texture, and, where possible, materials. Replacement of missing features will be substantiated by documentary and physical evidence.

The project drawings indicate that the existing non-historic aluminum windows and wood door would be replaced with counterparts more in keeping with the building’s historic character. As mentioned previously, the windows and door shown in the drawings appear compatible with the historic structure. In order to ensure that the replacements are historically accurate, additional physical investigation and research should be completed. Physical investigation should include removing the interior finishes from around the windows and examining the building’s framing. Ideally remnants of the original window framing survive inside the walls. If enough physical evidence survives it would be possible to either purchase or have custom wood or wood-clad, double-hung windows made that fit these dimensions. Even better would be to obtain historic photographs of the house to determine the exact appearance of the original door and windows, as well as the missing door and window trim. The El Cerrito Historical Society does not have any historic photographs of the Rodoni house, so the best chance to obtain one would be to contact the family.

Provided these steps are taken, the proposed project would comply with Rehabilitation Standard 6.

Rehabilitation Standard 7: Chemical or physical treatments, if appropriate, will be undertaken using the gentlest means possible. Treatments that cause damage to historic materials will not be used.

In preparation for painting the exterior, chemical and/or physical treatments would likely be used in the rehabilitation of the Rodoni house. When removing loose paint harsh treatments like sandblasting should not be used. Instead, power washing and hand sanding and scraping are appropriate physical treatments. When cleaning the exterior, gentle agents like trisodium phosphate (TSP) should be used.
Provided that these recommendations are followed, the proposed project would comply with Rehabilitation Standard 7.

**Rehabilitation Standard 8**: Archeological resources will be protected and preserved in place. If such resources must be disturbed, mitigation measures will be undertaken.

The proposed project would result in the excavation of much of the Rodoni property to construct foundations for the new condominium building and the relocated Rodoni house. Though there is no record of any archaeological resources in this part of El Cerrito at the Northwest Information Center, it is possible, that with the presence of the stream on the property, there could be prehistoric archaeological deposits. In addition, as a working ranch for over a century, there are likely historic-period resources on the property. In compliance with City regulations, the project sponsor would follow standard monitoring and data recovery procedures.

In summary, the proposed project complies with Rehabilitation Standard 8.

**Rehabilitation Standard 9**: New additions, exterior alterations, or related new construction will not destroy historic materials, features, and spatial relationships that characterize the property. The new work shall be differentiated from the old and will be compatible with the historic materials, features, size, scale and proportion, and massing to protect the integrity of the property and its environment.

As discussed above, the proposed project would construct a 14-unit, multi-family building on the northernmost two-thirds of the Rodoni property. This structure and its attendant landscaping would result in the removal of the remaining historic vernacular cultural landscape that presently exists on the site.

**Rodoni House**

The Rodoni house would be moved from where it is now to the southwestern corner of the property and rehabilitated. The exterior of the house would be restored to its historic appearance, and aside from the construction of a new rear stair, which would not be visible from Elm Street, the project would not result in any other additions being added to the house. Though the spatial relationships that characterize the property would change, placing the house by itself on the southern bank of the stone-lined creek channel, which would also be retained and restored as part of the project, would retain some sense of the property's historic agricultural use.

**Rodoni Property**

Though the ground has not been cultivated for over a decade now, the Rodoni property remains a rare example of a vernacular agricultural landscape from the Pioneer Era in El Cerrito's history. The only other comparable property in El Cerrito is the Navellier property, at 1332 Navellier Lane. The existing vernacular cultural landscape, which consists of fruit trees, grape arbors, and several deteriorated outbuildings, would all be removed. The historic stone creek bed would be retained and restored as part of the landscaping. Furthermore, the new landscaping planned for the southern third of the property, where the Rodoni house would be located, would consist of fruit trees now found elsewhere on the property, including pear, apple, and persimmon. Herb gardens near Elm Street would provide additional clues to the property's agricultural past. Finally, the new construction would be set back at least 13'-7” from the Rodoni house, and separated from it by the creek bed. It would not wrap around the rear of the historic
house, allowing the Rodoni house to continue to read as a freestanding structure. The design of the new building would recall but not mimic the architecture of the Rodoni house, ensuring that the Rodoni house continues to “read” as the only historic resource on the property. Though the siting and landscaping of the proposed project would go a long way toward reducing the effects of the project, the construction of a much larger residential building on the site of the former cultural landscape would destroy existing spatial relationships and remove existing materials and features.

In summary, the proposed project does not comply with Rehabilitation Standard 9.

Rehabilitation Standard 10: New additions and adjacent or related new construction will be undertaken in such a manner that, if removed in the future, the essential form and integrity of the historic property and its environment would be unimpaired.

As mentioned above, the construction of the proposed residential building would result in the removal of the majority of the Rodoni property’s vernacular cultural landscape. Nonetheless, if the proposed building was removed in the future, and the land re-cultivated, it would not be difficult to imagine the restored Rodoni house as part of a historic vernacular cultural landscape.

In summary, the proposed project complies with Rehabilitation Standard 10.

E. Analysis of Project-specific Impacts under CEQA

The proposed project complies with all ten Rehabilitation Standards except for Standards 1 and 9. Nonetheless, as a project that fails to comply with all ten Standards, it cannot benefit from a regulatory presumption that it would not have a significant adverse effect on the environment. Based on the analysis in this report, without formal mitigation, the project would likely have a significant impact on the historical resource, which is not just the Rodoni house but the entire Rodoni property.45

IX. Suggested Mitigation

According to Section 15126.4(b)(1) of the Public Resources Code (CEQA Guidelines): “Where maintenance, repair, stabilization, rehabilitation, restoration, preservation, conservation or reconstruction of the historical resource will be conducted in a manner consistent with the Secretary of the Interior’s Standards for the Treatment of Historic Properties with Guidelines for Preserving, Rehabilitating, Restoring, and Reconstructing Historic Buildings, the project’s impact on the historical resource will generally be considered mitigated below a level of significance and thus is not significant.” Because the proposed project would likely have a substantial adverse effect on a potential historic resource, mitigation measures may be required.

Historic resource mitigations are typically developed on a case-by-case basis, providing the opportunity to tailor them to the characteristics and the significance of the resource and the impacts to it. The more commonly adopted mitigation measures consist of 1) documentation of the affected resource – typically to Historic American Buildings Survey (HABS) standards; 2) preparation of a salvage plan for significant features and materials; or 3) making a commemorative plaque or interpretive display. While in some instances these mitigation measures, taken individually, are judged to reduce the adverse effects to a less-than-significant level, they often do not alter the loss to community character and collective history.

45 CEQA Guidelines subsection 15064.5(b).
Section 15126.4(b)(2) of the Public Resources Code is clear in this regard: “In some circumstances, documentation of an historical resource, by way of historic narrative, photographs or architectural drawings, as mitigation for the effects of demolition of the resource will not mitigate the effects to a point where clearly no significant effect on the environment would occur.” In the section below we outline several possible mitigation measures that may, in combination, mitigate the proposed project’s impacts to a less-than-significant level.

A. HABS-level Documentation

As mentioned above, documentation of a historical resource, by way of historical narrative, large-format black-and-white photography, and/or architectural drawings according to HABS archival standards as mitigation for the effects of the demolition or alteration of a resource will typically not mitigate the effects to a less-than-significant impact on its own. Part of the problem with HABS-level documentation as mitigation under CEQA is that the resource is lost to the community, and the recordation documents are not readily accessible to the public. However, HABS Level I or Level II documentation, in concert with other mitigation measures, may be sufficient to reduce the impacts of the project to a less-than-significant level, as determined by the City of El Cerrito. The following potential mitigation measures could be applied individually or together with HABS-level documentation to create an ideal mitigation package. The definitions of HABS-level documentation can be found on the National Park website: http://www.nps.gov/history/local-law/arch_stnds_6.htm

B. Façade Restoration

After 1968 the Rodoni house was remodeled. As part of this project the original wood windows were removed and historic wood trim removed from around the doors and windows. We suggest making a rigorous and well-documented façade restoration be made a possible mitigation measure and/or condition of approval. As mentioned above under the analysis of the project for compliance with the Secretary of the Interior’s Standards, the façade would need to be documented by either physical and/or documentary evidence to establish what the façade looked like during the period of significance. As described above, removing interior finishes from around the windows would likely provide information on the original size of the windows. The original windows were almost certainly wood and double-hung with a light pattern of one-over-one, or possibly two-over-one. For determining the type of wood windows (and trim) originally used, a historic photograph would be most helpful. Though the door in the main entrance was changed in the 1940s, during the period of significance, it is not compatible with the Queen Anne façade. Again, a historic photograph would be helpful in revealing what type of door the house originally had. It may be possible to procure a similar door at a salvage company such as Urban Ore or Omega Salvage in Berkeley, or a compatible door could be custom-fabricated.
X. Conclusion

Originally developed in 1897 by Ambrose and Virginia Rodoni as a single-family residence and small weekend ranch, the property now known as 1715 Elm Street was expanded with additional lot purchases until reaching its present size in 1924. As the property expanded the Rodoni family was able to expand the range of activities possible, which eventually included the cultivation of fruit trees, wine grapes, and row crops. For its first half-century of existence, the Rodoni property used well water, likely augmented by the water from the unnamed creek that cuts across the property. The property remained in the Rodoni family from 1897 until 2002 and it was evidently cultivated until the end. Today it remains one of a very small number of historic agricultural properties left in El Cerrito, a community once known for its dairies, nurseries, and ranches. The Rodoni house is a good example of a vernacular Victorian-era dwelling built for an immigrant family of modest means. Designed in a vernacular version of the Queen Anne style, the dwelling also incorporates some characteristics of the contemporary Neoclassic Rowhouse style. Though the dwelling has been altered, it is still recognizable, retaining its historic massing, scale, cladding, fenestration pattern, and most of its original spare ornamentation. According to the analysis in this report, 1715 Elm Street appears eligible for listing in the California Register under Criterion 1 (Events) as one of the oldest houses in El Cerrito and for its association with the city’s Italian community. It also appears eligible under Criterion 3 (Design/Construction) as a vernacular cultural landscape embodying the increasingly rare characteristics of a rural ranch property in El Cerrito. Based on this evaluation, 1715 Elm Street appears to be a historical resource under CEQA. As such, the proposed project – which would entail moving the house to the southwest corner of the property and redeveloping the balance with a three-story, 14-unit condominium building – would likely have a significant adverse effect on the environment. This report concludes with potential mitigation measures that would likely reduce the project impacts to a less-than-significant effect.
XI. Bibliography

A. Published


B. Public Records


CEQA Guidelines subsection 15064.5(b).

Contra Costa County Assessor: Sales Ledgers and deeds for 1715 Elm Street.

El Cerrito Planning Division: Building and alteration permits on file for 1715 Elm Street.

United States Census Bureau: Census Schedules for 1880-1930.
C. Periodicals

California Architect and Building News.

Oakland Tribune.

San Francisco Call.

San Francisco Chronicle.

San Francisco Examiner.