



STAFF REPORT

DATE: MAY 4, 2026

TO: PLANNING COMMISSION

FROM: KATRINA KAWAGOE, SENIOR PLANNER

SUBJECT: PLANNING APPLICATION NO. 260077
APPLICANT: LOURDES CAWILE & DEBRA BEST
LOCATION: 39 SILVER SADDLE LANE

OVERVIEW

A Neighborhood Compatibility Determination (NC-260078) to legalize existing unpermitted retaining walls and a Grading Permit (G-260079) for the import of more than 20 cubic yards of earth materials and for grading on a slope greater than 35%.

BACKGROUND

Application Filed: 1/26/2026
Application Deemed Complete: 4/2/2026
Public Notices Mailed: 4/23/2026
Public Notices Posted: 4/23/2026

The applicable Rolling Hills Estates Municipal Code Sections are Chapter 17.06 (Residential Districts Generally), Chapter 17.07 (Grading in Residential Districts), Chapter 17.12 (R-A-15 District), and Chapter 17.62 (Neighborhood Compatibility).

The Project was reviewed in accordance with the California Environmental Quality Act (Public Resources Code § 21000 and following: “CEQA”) and the State CEQA Guidelines (14 CCR § 15000 and following) and was determined to be Categorically Exempt under Class 1, Section 15301(d) Existing Facilities. The project is consistent with the restoration or rehabilitation of deteriorated or damaged structures to meet current standards of public safety.

The subject property has a General Plan Land Use designation of Low Density Residential, is zoned Single-family Residential – Limited Agricultural District (R-A-15), and is surrounded by residential properties of the same zoning. The proposed improvements are subject to Implementation Measure 2.1.2.1 of the General Plan, which requires the City to continue to implement the Neighborhood Compatibility Ordinance.

The subject neighborhood is located west of Palos Verdes Drive North and South of Hawthorne Boulevard. The subject property is located within the Los Ranchos Verdes

Homeowner's Association. The HOA was notified of the proposed project and had no additional comments.

A notice was distributed to the property owners within a 500' radius of the subject property. Staff did not receive comment letters regarding the project. Any additional correspondence received after agenda distribution and prior to the May 4, 2026 Planning Commission meeting, will be distributed to the Commission via separate memo.

DISCUSSION

Existing Site Conditions

The subject property is a 16,995 square-foot (SF) lot with primary access from Silver Saddle Lane with the rear property line running parallel to Hawthorne Boulevard. The existing 3,214 SF residence was built in 1957 and is situated on a building pad at the front of the lot. From this point, the topography slopes significantly downward toward the rear property line. Three existing retaining walls in the center of the lot form a ramp, providing access to the lower portion of the property. Portions of the existing walls on the south side of the lot are within 2' of the side property line, which does not comply with the setback requirements of RHEMC Section 17.07.080.F.

In 2023, City staff observed the unauthorized removal of a guardrail along Hawthorne Boulevard, which had been facilitated to provide construction vehicle access for grading activities within the subject property's rear yard. A subsequent investigation by the Code Compliance Officer confirmed that three failing retaining walls had been replaced with a stackable block retaining wall system (Verdura wall) without the benefit of required permits. Consequently, a Notice of Violation was issued to the homeowners.

While staff initially requested structural plans from the project contractor, the subsequent structural report was deemed insufficient for the scope of work. Following unsuccessful attempts to obtain the necessary documentation to legalize the structures, the contractor abandoned the project, citing scheduling conflicts.

Upon establishing direct communication with the homeowners, it was determined they were unaware of the permit requirements or the illegal status of the walls. Since then, the homeowners have cooperated with staff to legalize the improvements, including retaining Bolton Engineering to prepare as-built plans. Although these plans received Zone Clearance from the Planning Division for the repair and replacement of the walls, a subsequent Building and Safety plan check determined the current configuration to be structurally insufficient under current Building Code standards. Additional structural modifications are now required prior to final permit approval.

Proposed Project

Following extensive consultation with City staff and Bolton Engineering, the applicants opted to construct two supplemental retaining walls situated between the three existing

structures. The proposed design necessitates a larger volume of grading than what is permitted by right, which triggers discretionary review and approval by the Planning Commission.

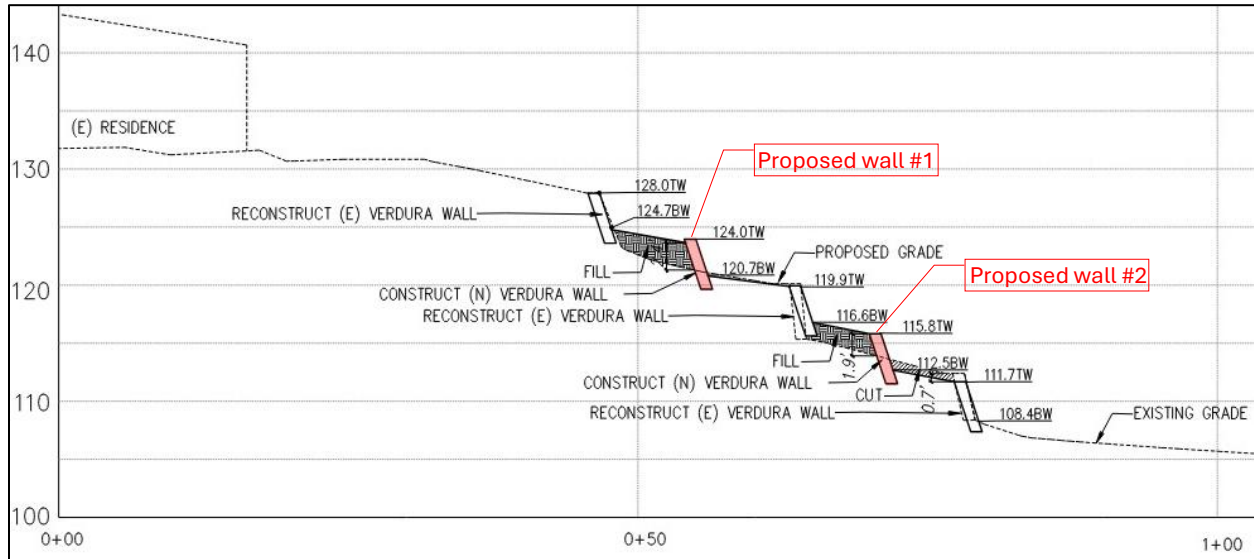


Figure 1: Proposed Section

As illustrated above, the two supplemental walls will be situated at 6' wide intervals from the existing structures, with neither exceeding a maximum height of 3.3'. To provide necessary structural support, the design includes variable cut and fill with a maximum fill of 5.4' and maximum cut of 3'. Additionally, the project involves the minor reconstruction of two of the three original retaining walls to ensure site stability. Lastly, the two non-conforming walls that terminate along the south side property line will be moved and reconstructed outside of the 2' wide required setback to meet municipal code standards.

The proposed rear yard improvements meet the development standards outlined in the Municipal Code. The applicable Residential Development Standards as they pertain to retaining walls are as follows:

RHEMC Section	Applicable Development Standard	Conformance with the Standard
Section 17.06.380	A maximum 5' high retaining walls in the side and rear yards.	Conforms. The maximum height of the proposed wall will not exceed 3.3' high.
Section 17.06.380.B	A minimum horizontal separation between adjacent walls and fences that equals the height of the tallest adjacent wall or fence.	Conforms. A separation of 6' is proposed between each existing and proposed wall.
Section 17.07.080.F	A minimum grading setback of 2' from any property line.	Conforms. The non-complying walls will be moved and reconstructed to meet this standard.

Neighborhood Compatibility (NC-260078)

In an effort to maintain the established character of the existing neighborhood, neighborhood compatibility reviews assess proposals for the modification of existing structures to ensure that the proposed architectural style and overall construction remains consistent with the existing house and neighborhood. The current proposal is for site improvements in the rear yard with no proposed modifications to the existing residence which maintains a two-story Ranch architectural style.

To maintain Neighborhood Compatibility, residential construction proposals shall address the following objectives as found in Chapter 17.62:

1. **Natural Amenities.** Improvements to residential property shall respect and preserve to the greatest extent possible existing topography, landscaping, and natural features.

The proposal satisfies the established criteria by using a design that stabilizes the significant downward slope while respecting the property's existing topography. Through a tiered configuration featuring supplemental 3.3' high walls positioned between existing structures, the project effectively terraces the grade to ensure structural stability without requiring mass regrading or total site reconstruction. The selection of a Verdura wall system integrates a "living wall" concept into the hillside, allowing for vegetation coverage to preserve the natural aesthetic and avoid the visual impact of a traditional concrete wall.

2. **Neighborhood Character.** Proposals shall be compatible with the existing neighborhood character in terms of scale of development, architectural style and materials.

The proposal satisfies the established criteria because the scope of work is confined to the rear yard. The use of Verdura "living walls" provides a natural, vegetated appearance that is compatible with the rural character of the neighborhood. Furthermore, the project scope is limited to the stabilization of the slope and does not alter the primary structure, ensuring the home remains compatible with the neighborhood.

3. **Scale.** Designs should minimize the appearance of overbuilt property to both public and private view. The square footage of the residence and total lot coverage should reflect the rural character of the City and neighborhood.

The proposal satisfies the established criteria as the improvements are focused on the stabilization of a previously improved slope rather than increasing the footprint of the primary residence. The tiered wall system utilizes low-profile, 3.3' high segments to break up the massing of the hillside. This approach, coupled with the Verdura wall system

minimizes the appearance of an overbuilt, maintaining a scale that is appropriate for the hillside topography.

4. Style. Proposals shall address the following design elements: façade treatments (avoid stark and unbroken walls), structure height(s), open spaces, roof design, appurtenances, mass and bulk. These design elements should be compatible with the existing home and neighborhood and in all instances seek to minimize the appearance of a massive structure.

The proposal satisfies the established criteria by avoiding stark or unbroken surfaces through the use of a "living wall" system. The Verdura blocks encourage plant growth, providing a textured, soft facade that is architecturally compatible with the existing landscape and surrounding neighborhood. By limiting the supplemental walls to a maximum height of 3.3', the design achieves the specific elevation required for slope stability while maintaining a low-profile massing that avoids the appearance of a massive structure.

5. Privacy. Proposals shall maintain an adequate separation between the proposed structures and adjacent property lines. In addition, proposed balconies, decks and windows shall respect the existing privacy of surrounding properties.

The proposal satisfies the established criteria by correcting existing non-conformities to restore proper setbacks. To resolve a violation of RHEMC Section 17.07.080.F, two wall segments currently located within 2' of the side property line will be relocated and reconstructed to maintain the mandatory separation from the property line. Because the improvements are confined to low retaining walls and involve no new balconies or windows, the project maintains the existing privacy of adjacent properties.

6. Views. Designs should respect existing neighboring views.

The proposal satisfies the established criterion as the tiered wall system is designed to follow the natural contours of the downward slope, ensuring the structures remain low-profile and do not project into protected view corridors. By keeping supplemental wall heights to a maximum of 3.3', the project avoids obstructing views from neighboring properties.

Based on the analysis above, it is staff's opinion that the proposed site improvements respect existing neighbor views and are also consistent with the character of the immediate neighborhood. As such, staff is able to support an affirmative determination of Neighborhood Compatibility for this project.

Grading Criteria (G-260079)

Discretionary review by the Planning Commission of a grading application is required in the following scenarios:

1. Any excavation or fill of earth materials greater than three feet in vertical height at its deepest point;
2. Any importation or exportation of earth materials greater than twenty cubic yards; or
3. Any grading on a slope equal to or greater than thirty-five percent.

The project meets all the criteria for discretionary review based on the following: variable cut and fill in the rear yard reaches a maximum fill of 5.4' and a maximum cut of 3', the project involves the import of 62 cubic yards of earth materials, and will involve grading on a 43% slope.

The Planning Commission shall use but not be limited to the following criteria in assessing an application for grading approval:

1. The grading is not excessive beyond that necessary for the permitted primary use of the lot.

The proposal satisfies the established criterion as the primary objective of the grading is remedial slope stabilization to address existing structural concerns. By utilizing a tiered wall system with supplemental walls limited to 3.3' in height, the project achieves necessary stability with the minimum volume of earthwork required. This focused approach avoids mass regrading of the lot and preserves the majority of the existing retaining walls, ensuring the grading is strictly limited to the extent necessary for the continued safe residential use of the property.

2. The grading and/or construction does not significantly adversely affect the visual relationships with, nor the views from, neighboring sites.

The proposal satisfies the established criterion as the tiered grading is designed to follow the natural downward contours of the slope, keeping the improvements low-profile and below existing view corridors. Additionally, the relocation of wall segments to comply with the mandatory 2' setback ensures that the grading respects established property boundaries and visual buffers.

3. The nature of the grading minimizes disturbance to the natural contours; finished contours are reasonably natural.

The proposal satisfies the established criterion as the project focuses on the remediation of an area previously disturbed by existing retaining walls rather than the alteration of untouched land. The proposed grading represents the minimum extent necessary to facilitate the stabilization of the 43% slope. By utilizing a tiered wall

system, the project achieves necessary structural integrity while following the natural contours of the hillside, ensuring the finished grade remains reasonably natural and consistent with the surrounding topography.

4. The nature of the grading is in conformance with the neighborhood compatibility ordinance as set forth in Section 17.62.010.

The proposal satisfies the established criterion because the grading plan directly supports the neighborhood compatibility findings by preserving natural amenities and maintaining a scale appropriate for the area. The shift toward a "living wall" system ensures that the graded areas will maintain the lush, vegetated character typical of the surrounding neighborhood. Correcting setback violations will keep the grading compatible with the primary residence and adjacent properties.

5. The proposed grading meets the grading standards and design criteria as set forth in Section 17.07.080.

The proposal satisfies the established criteria for grading standards and design criteria by restoring code-compliant setbacks and ensuring structural integrity. Specifically, the project relocates two wall segments that were in violation of RHEMC Section 17.07.080.F, moving them outside the 2' setback requirement.

CONCLUSION

Staff has worked with the applicant to address the requirements of the Municipal Code, including Neighborhood Compatibility and Grading requirements. As summarized in this report, staff is able to support the Grading application and has determined that Neighborhood Compatibility has been achieved.

RECOMMENDATION

Staff recommends that the Planning Commission approve PA-260077, subject to the following conditions:

1. All improvements hereafter constructed or installed on land which is the subject of this approval shall be located substantially as shown on Attachment A and/or as required under the Municipal Code and/or as required in these conditions.
2. In the event of one or more violations of these conditions, the City Manager shall have enforcement capability to remedy such violations and/or revoke said approvals.
3. The applicant must submit the entire project for plan check with the Department of Building and Safety within two years of approval of this application (RHEMC Section 17.72.110.B). All colors and materials shall be noted on plans and Zone Clearance is contingent upon adherence to the conditions of approval.

4. Per RHEMC Section 8.20.120, the City of Rolling Hills Estates maintains an exclusive franchise agreement with Waste Management, for the collection of solid waste, recycling, and green waste services for residential and non-residential properties, as well as for the collection of construction-related generated waste for residential and non-residential projects. All bins maintained on private property and/or any bins placed in the Public Right of Way, with benefit of an encroachment permit during construction activities, must be contracted through Waste Management. Service may be coordinated by contacting Waste Management at (800) 774-0222.
5. Trucks transporting dirt, organic material, and demolition debris from the site must be covered and hosed down in a location on-site prior to exiting the property. Any trucks transporting dirt and or organic material to the site must be covered or properly secured to prevent off-site debris to the satisfaction of the City Traffic Engineer. If access from Hawthorne Boulevard is required for construction or hauling, the applicant will submit a Traffic Control Plan for approval and obtain an Encroachment Permit for any work, staging, or hauling occurring within the Public Right of Way.
6. All construction activity is limited to the hours between 7:00 A.M. and 5:00 P.M. Monday through Friday, and 9:00 A.M. and 5:00 P.M. on Saturday. No work is permitted on Sundays or holidays (New Year's Day, Memorial Day, Independence Day, Labor Day, Thanksgiving Day and Christmas Day).
7. No queuing of trucks or arrival of construction materials and/or workers to the construction site is permitted outside the permitted construction hours and days.
8. The applicant must comply with the City's Noise Ordinance during the construction of the project.
9. The applicant must comply with all applicable NPDES (National Pollutant Discharge Elimination Systems) requirements.

Attachments

- A. Plans*
- B. Grading Application*