

Partners in new Eastside housing plan want a review

Residents still want to expand Frederick St. Park

Eastside
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SANTA CRUZ — Two women with plans to build new homes at a former church site in Seabright have caved to pressures from neighbors who'd rather see the land used to expand Frederick Street Park.

While the partners say they're willing to sell the land, no offers have come forward so far.

Christy Brandt and Michelle Bensky, who bought the Frederick Street property from the Jehovah's Witnesses Church in 2005, put their housing plans on hold indefinitely this week to study potential environmental impacts with the project.

The two have called for the study despite city Planning Department officials saying none is required.

"We're trying really hard to build some-

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thing good for the city," said Brandt, 41, a longtime area resident who works at Adobe in San Jose. "We've addressed every single thing we've heard from the community. It's part of being thorough about the project."

Frederick Street Park, established 30 years ago out of neighborhood concerns about development, is a popular place for children to play and runners and walkers to access the Santa Cruz Small Craft Harbor.

The duo's development plans, hotly contested by neighbors, require demolishing a church building and storage shed on the property. The 45,000-square-foot plot, which overlooks the harbor, is zoned for residential development.

Their housing plans have been scaled down several times during the past year in response to community concerns. The latest draft calls for eight single-family homes. They've eliminated three townhomes and three granny units from their original plans.

Brandt and Bensky say they've gone door-to-door to meet residents and explain the project. They've held four community meetings and created a Web site with details of the plans.

Their outreach efforts were designed to win neighbors' support. But many against the project say they'll scrutinize the environmental review, and regardless of what the study says, move ahead with attempts to buy the land.

A group of about 30 Seabright neighbors are currently working with the Trust Republic Land in San Francisco to find a way to pur-

chase the land and add it to Frederick Street Park. They also have hired local land-use attorney Jonathan Witwer to help in their fight, and private fundraising efforts are also under way.

"We're pleased to hear there will be some level of environmental review, since there are clear issues around traffic, blocking views of Arana Gulch and other things that should be evaluated," said Skip Spitzer, a spokesman for Seabright Neighbors Association. "We think the best solution here for everyone is us, the owners, the city and public trust organizations working together to acquire the land to expand the park. We appreciate the owners' willingness to explore this route with us."

Julie Shattuck, who lives two blocks from Frederick Street Park on Baymount Street, criticizes the housing plans as a luxury development for out-of-town buyers.

"Overwhelmingly, the neighborhood would like to see this property utilized as additional park space," Shattuck said. "(Michelle and Christy) have certainly expressed interest in the community's concerns, but we're interested in continuing conversations about a possible acquisition."

Bensky and Brandt plan to live in two of the homes with their husbands and children.

The city Planning Commission denied Bensky and Brandt's proposal in October in a narrow 4-3 vote based largely on community opposition.

The City Council will decide on the housing project after the environmental review is complete, which is expected to take at least a month.

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