

Revised Aptos Village Plan Moving Ahead, Approval Likely

Planning Commission Vote Sends It to Supervisors Next

by Linda Fridy

The latest version of the Aptos Village Plan gained approval from the Santa Cruz County Planning Commission on Feb. 10 after a 90-minute public comment period and another half hour of discussion among commissioners. The unanimous decision sends the plan on to the Board of Supervisors for a likely Feb. 23 public hearing.

This new version addresses a smaller area than the existing plan, which was last updated in 1985.

The plan focuses on about 15 acres bordered by the two trestle bridges, the Post Office end of Cathedral Drive and Highway 1.

The revision creates a new commercial section centered on a village green in the undeveloped land north of Soquel Drive. It also aims to bring zoning into line with existing uses in the southern and western portions.

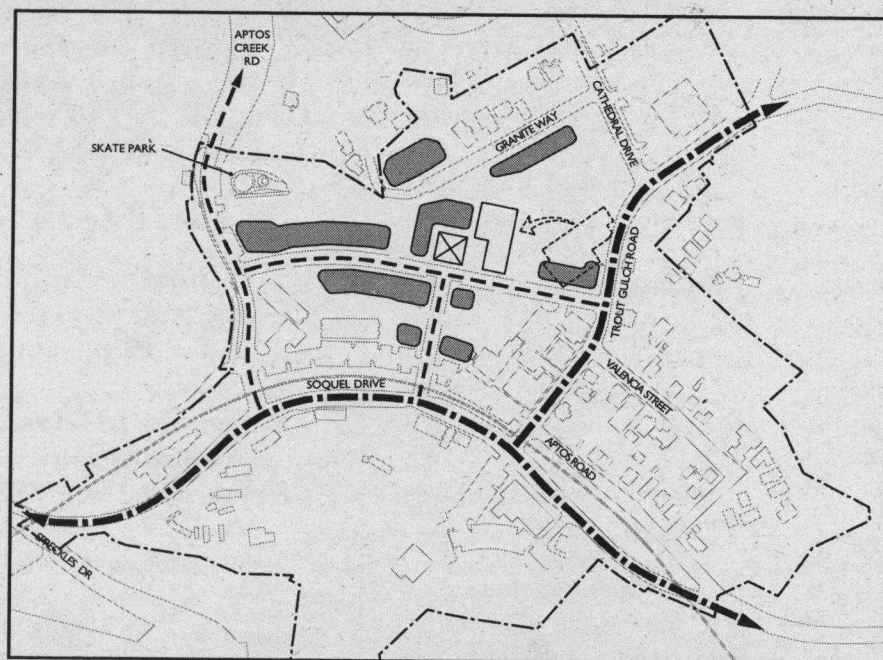
About 40 people attended the public hearing and the majority of the speakers supported the plan, which has been in the works for eight years. Opposition came from some residents who like Aptos just the way it is.

"Do we really need more stores? I ask you to save this country village and country way of life," said resident Gail Adams, who was joined by several other speakers who questioned the need for additional development.

"I love the quaint little funky town we have now," agreed resident Allen Cypher.

Others, however, said the plan with its central open park and pedestrian-friendly approach would be a welcome change.

"This could give the whole village a heart and a sense of



The revised Aptos Village Plan would create two new streets and move the historic Apple Barn to a site next to a central village green. Planning commissioners opted to let the community decide if a proposed park along Aptos Creek Road should house bike jumps or a skateboarding feature.

community," said resident Chris Klein.

Commissioners acknowledged the density concerns, but noted that this plan amendment actually reduces the potential development allowed compared to the current plan.

"This is not pristine land," added Commissioner Albert Aramburu.

John Hibble of the Aptos Chamber and History Museum recalled that Aptos Village's sleepy nature is a more recent development following the loss of vibrant lumber and then apple production.

"This was a really bustling town [some time ago]," he said.

Sidewalks Soon, Please

Perhaps the most popular element of the new plan is the addition of sidewalks along both existing streets and new ones planned behind Soquel Drive.

Speaker after speaker, from parents with children to seniors, said they would love to be able to walk safely around the

village.

Extending sidewalks to Valencia Elementary School outside the plan area got unanimous support from the community.

The plan also requires significant traffic improvements such as adding signals and turn lanes along Soquel Drive and the roads that feed into it. Community members asked that such improvements be made at the start of any new development.

The railroad trestles and historic Aptos Creek Bridge on Soquel Drive limit any attempts at widening the roadway.

Questions arose about the creation of another road that would cross the rail line to intersect Soquel Drive, which would bring the total to four overcrossings in what one speaker said was a quarter-mile stretch of railway. The Public Utilities Commission oversees that element, staff said.

A portion of the undeveloped land currently serves as a dirt bike jump park that has

garnered a national reputation. A number of speakers expressed support for continuing that feature, saying even those in the community who do not use it enjoy watching those who do.

They suggested that it could be moved to the spot along Aptos Road that the plan earmarked for a skate park. Other speakers supported the skate park, some wanted both and still others wanted neither use.

Commissioner Renee Shepherd suggested that the decision is really up to the county parks department and the community and successfully lobbied for a change in wording to allow "active recreational use" at the location.

Preserving Historic Structures

Some speakers questioned whether the plan will preserve the remaining buildings that represent Aptos' history. The plan calls for the Apple Barn that currently fronts Trout Gulch Road to be relocated adjacent to the village green.

"I don't want you to have a false sense of security that the Apple Barn can be moved and maintain its historical integrity," warned Carolyn Swift of the county's historic resources commission.

She said her group did not feel it had sufficient information to recommend the plan to move the structure and worried about how much "restoration" would be involved.

Barry Swenson Builder,

which owns most of the undeveloped land and is working on a development plan, has mentioned using the historic structure for a grocery store. Although Swenson's plan was not a part of this review, a few commissioners also expressed concerns and confirmed that the relocation called for strict review by the historic resources commission.

Staff said that if problems arise with moving the barn, the plan would need amending.

The small historic firehouse is also slated for relocation, although the proposed new location is uncertain.

Consistent, Easier Zoning

Much of the discussion focused on the undeveloped area within the plan, but county staff strove to address concerns with existing buildings.

Lead planner Glenda Hill explained that the Hihn area, near the southern trestle, is filled with non-conforming uses such as businesses in historic homes. Frederick Hihn was an early pioneer who owned large blocks of land throughout the region, and was part of a group that first pierced narrow gauge rails into Aptos. He died in the early 1900s.

The amended plan will change the zoning for that area and more recent development across Soquel Drive. It allows for mixed use, bringing current occupants into compliance, and reduces the amount of planning oversight a change requires.

Commissioner Scott Kennedy praised a mixed use approach, saying it improves community and security to have people living in an area.

The plan anticipates only 63 new housing units, which are mostly scattered around the perimeter. ■