

'Friends' challenge Rispin conversion

By BOB SMITH

Conversion of the old Rispin Mansion on the banks of Soquel Creek into a senior citizens' home should be blocked by the city of Capitola, the leader of an ad hoc group contends.

The fate of the old mansion, which has been abandoned for the last two decades, is rapidly becoming a highly sensitive political issue in the city.

City Planning Commission chairman Howard Dysle wants to build a 100-unit senior citizen's complex on the property.

His opponents, Friends of the Rispin Estate, want the city to take control of the land, and use it as recreation and open space.

Dr. Barry Staley, an Aptos dentist who lives in Capitola across Soquel Creek from the old home, is chairman of and spokesman for the Friends group.

He says the group believes the city should stick to the terms of its General Plan, the Local Coastal Plan and the zoning ordinances and not allow Dysle to change the city's general plan, zoning ordinance and Local Coastal Plan and then rebuild the mansion, adding 100 units of senior citizen housing to the present four-story, 9,000-square-foot building.

"It's really strange that it is the chairman of the planning commission that is asking for a change in the rules," Staley said last week in an interview. "I don't think the city residents want that to happen."

An Environmental Impact Report has been written on the conversion proposal, and the public comment on the report has been extended to Feb. 28 — 30 days longer than normal — because the Capitola planning department did not send copies of the EIR to the state clearinghouse.

A public hearing on the EIR will be held by the Planning Commission next month, probably on March 17.

But the planning commissioners will be

asked by City Planning Director Richard Steele in a precedent-setting move Thursday night, to submit written comments on the report prior to being asked to formally accept the report at a public hearing March 17.

Steele concedes that the move is unusual but says he is doing so in an attempt to get the concerns of individual planning commissioners addressed by the EIR consultant before the public hearing.

The mansion was built in 1923 by San Francisco oil millionaire Henry Rispin. In the last 60 years, it has had a variety of roles, including that of a convent.

Now, it is a derelict, vandalized to its still-sound concrete shell; its opulent fixtures and decorations gone, a magnet for vagrants and vandals.

Dysle wants to make the old mansion the focal point for a 100-unit senior citizens complex on the banks of Soquel Creek.

He says he wants to restore the old mansion, and build two new buildings — one on either side of the existing building.

The largest of the new buildings will be constructed on the north (upstream) side of the Rispin Mansion. It would range from two to four stories in height, be approximately 400 feet long and generally parallel Soquel Creek.

Divided into two wings — one on the east and one on the west — the building would accommodate 83 living units for ambulatory senior citizen residents. Each unit would house one or two people in a studio or one-bedroom apartment setting with a private deck. Residents would take their meals in a central dining facility in the Rispin Mansion.

The second new building would be much smaller. Built to the south of the mansion, it would contain 13 units for non-ambulatory residents and a nursing staff area.

The Rispin Mansion

would be used as a central administrative, dining and recreational facility. The building's exterior would be restored to its original appearance. The interior would be restored to its original condition in some areas and modified for new uses in other areas. The formal gardens that once existed in the area between Wharf Road and the Mansion would be restored. The solid masonry wall along Wharf Road and the wooden well tower on the site will be retained.

Staley's group contends that the plan violates the 1975 general plan, the LCP and the zoning ordinance.

"The General Plan says the site should be used as open space," Staley contends.

He goes beyond that.

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"I would like to see it in city hands," Staley contended.

"The general plan calls for public development. That could be either passive or active," Staley added. One use of the mansion, he said, would be as a cultural center. "We have no library and the historical museum is overcrowded."

"That is what the city should be looking at and what we, the citizens, think is a good idea."

If that doesn't come about, Staley said, then the city should find someone interested in restoring the mansion to its former glory, and in the process reap substantial tax benefits.

As it is now, Staley contends, Dysle's plan would also destroy the mansion as one of the city's historical resources.

Staley cites a letter written by Cabrillo Col-

lege history instructor Sandy Lydon, a well-known and highly popular local history expert.

Lydon criticizes the historical section of the EIR, and says Dysle is proposing a simple rehabilitation of the structure, not a historically accurate restoration.

Lydon recommends a thorough, professional inventory of the mansion's historic resources be done and that a precise history of Rispin and the building be written.

He would also like to see a professional historian hired to protect the building history, and that it be nominated to the National Registry of Historic Places before building is started.

"Tremendous effort was made (in the EIR) to catalog every living creature within a hundred yards of the

place, but the historic section was tossed off without regard to any historical standards of precision or processes," Lydon said in a critique of the EIR.

"The Rispin Mansion represents an important era in Capitola's development, and the decisions made by the city of Capitola about the building will represent another important era — the 1980s," the well-known local history expert added.

"What's now facing the city of Capitola is the last opportunity to preserve a sense of Henry Allen Rispin and his times. I hope that the Capitola Planning Commission and the Capitola City Council will require anyone proposing to develop the Rispin site to pay more than lip service to the history of Rispin, his family and his mansion."