

Villagers band together



Bill Lovejoy/Sentinel

Residents of upper village neighborhoods of Capitola display some of the petitions they have collected.

Group opposes Bay Avenue development, national chains

By ERIN K. QUIRK
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CAPITOLA — Nearly one month has passed since the public first spoke out on the proposed development at Bay Avenue.

Since then the developer has revised his plans and opponents have refined their arguments.

One of the stand-out opponents is a brand new organization called Citizens WAVE or Citizens Working to Advance the Village Environment. Its petition-touting, pavement-pounding volunteers have, in two weeks, gathered a membership of 289 people, organizers said.

They have also started a legal defense fund and made postcards opponents can mail to the City Council, asking it to reject the Bay Avenue proposal. City Manager Susan Westman said the city has received about 100 of these cards.

"I realize it's impossible to educate everybody by Aug. 29," said Barbara Graves, resident and co-founder of WAVE. "This is a nationwide effort, people starting to realize that these economics don't work for our communities."

Graves is referring to the likelihood that national chain stores could become tenants of the proposed 80,000-square-foot retail center next to Nob Hill Foods. Graves has spent the last two weeks researching retail space nationwide and providing information to WAVE members.

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One statistic she likes to cite: According to researcher Robert Goodman, by 1990 shopping-center vacancies were almost 12 percent nationwide. But in that same year 300 million more retail feet were added.

The organization, Graves said, is modeled after a citizen's group in Golden, Colo., that introduced a slow-growth initiative on the ballot. The initiative, Graves said, "passed overwhelmingly."

Aside from environmental issues and architectural and traffic concerns, the group is mostly concerned about the changing face of the village and the city's responsibility to save it.

"We are seeing Capitola as a government that doesn't support small business. They support big retail business," Graves said.

But City Manager Susan Westman disagreed.

She said the parking lot, built behind City Hall, is a good example of the

city's support of small and large businesses. She said the number of public hearings that have been held on this issue is a clear indicator of a healthy public process.

"What the city is going to do and what the council said they will do is work with the developer, work with Fish and Game and work with the neighborhoods and people around the project to come up with a project that is viable and works for everyone," she said.

Mayor Margaret Fabrizio, who said she is not close to a decision on the project, suggested neighborhood meetings with council members and project planners might be the first step in reaching a compromise.

"We need to calm people down, talk about the actual plan and straighten out the misinformation," Fabrizio said.

Councilman Bob Garcia, like the neighbors group, has serious concerns about traffic but said the space is zoned for retail use.

"Most people I've talked to said, 'Yeah, commercial is fine,' but many have said it is too large."

Garcia and Fabrizio said the reaction they have received while walking neighborhoods has been mixed. Fabrizio said opinion is split 50-50.

John Tremoulis, of Redtree Properties, said the planners are back at the drawing boards trying to accommodate residents' concerns. Westman said the Aug. 29 hearing will give people the chance to see if they succeeded.