

Eastiders want more park, less development

Housing project to replace church site

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SANTA CRUZ — At least 600 city residents are digging in to fight a proposed housing project they say is “out of character” and “too dense” for their quaint, sometimes quirky Seabright neighborhood.

The residents are circulating a petition to encourage city leaders to reject the project proposed by longtime local residents Michelle Bensky and Christy Brandt for a former church site next to Frederick Street Park.

“The proposed development will box in our heavily used park, shrinking its usable space and blocking priceless views of the Arana Gulch greenbelt,” Julie Shattuck, a member of Seabright Neighbors Association, said. “It annexes the park as de facto

Homes

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front yards for luxury homes.”

The park, established out of similar neighborhood concerns about development three decades ago, is a popular place for children to play and runners and walkers to access the Santa Cruz Small Craft Harbor.

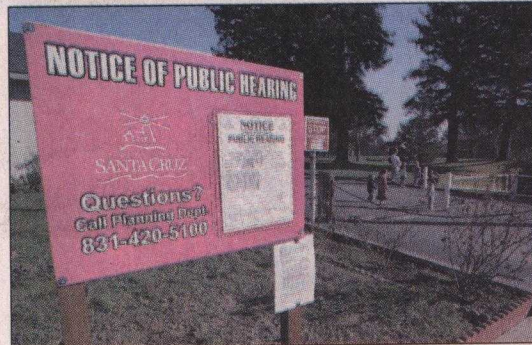
Bensky and Brandt — a massage therapist and computer industry worker, respectively — bought the Frederick Street land next to the park from the Jehovah’s Witnesses Church in 2005, and crafted plans to build six single-family houses, three townhomes and three granny units on the property. The homes would be 2.5 stories high.

The duo’s development plans 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.

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

“We are not commercial developers,” they wrote on a Web site explaining the project. “When we say we are not commercial developers, what we mean is that we do not develop or invest in property for a



living. We have however done some real estate investing on the side from our full-time jobs.”

Residents opposed to the development believe the city should take advantage of “fleeting opportunities to create more open space” by expanding Frederick Street Park to include the former church location.

Seabright Neighbors Association says it’s in the process of raising funds to buy the land. The group has also contacted various land trusts to help with their cause.

John Swift, a local land-use consultant working with Bensky and Brandt, said the two might be willing to sell for the right price, though no offers have been presented.

Bensky and Brandt referred media calls to Swift on Friday.

The land is not designated to be a park under the city’s general plan, Swift said, and the city Parks and

A sign alerts Frederick Street Park neighbors to the proposed project for the old church property next to the park.

Bill Lovejoy/
Sentinel

Recreation Department currently could not afford to purchase or maintain additional open space.

Former Santa Cruz Mayor Sally Digirolomo said the community fought hard to establish Frederick Street Park 30 years ago.

“Now the community is at it again for more open space for this underserved part of our city,” Digirolomo said.

The city Planning Commission denied Bensky and Brandt’s proposal in October in a narrow 4-3 vote based largely on community opposition. About 30 residents showed up at the commission’s meeting to lobby against the development.

The City Council will decide whether to let the duo move forward with the development at its 7 p.m. meeting Dec. 12.

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