

Aptos Village Plan Looks at Town Center's Future

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by Sukhjit Purewal

As developers eye growth opportunities in the vacant lots in Aptos Village, residents and the Santa Cruz County Board of Supervisors are taking up the task of updating the Aptos Village Plan to decide how development should proceed in the oldest part of town.

Originally written in 1979 as part of the Aptos General Plan, the official Village blueprint hasn't been updated since 1985. The plan is a "community statement," according to Second District Supervisor Ellen Pirie, for how residents and merchants want the Village to grow.

After several town meetings — and more are in the works for 2003 — Pirie and the County Planning Commissioners have learned that residents desperately want relief from the turtle-pace traffic that crowds through the narrow stretch of village before more development is finalized. A traffic study is under way to find out what can be done to make this goal a reality, although many natural and manmade impediments exist to expanding roadways including the train trestle abutting the Village.

Meanwhile, the Aptos Chamber of Commerce is hoping the Village will become more visible by a transformation into a historical district. The proposal is expected to come before County Supervisors for a vote in early 2003.

And by next summer, Pirie hopes to bring a modern version of the Aptos Village Plan before the Board for adoption, with or without language to include the historical district. Pirie said that the delays and effort was critical.

"The Village is a unique area. If we blow it in terms of development, once it's done, it's done," Pirie said.

Residents Weigh In ...

Pirie said she has been approached by lot owners who want



Thirteen buildings in Aptos Village are listed as historical buildings, and the entire Village may eventually be designated as a historical district.

to develop properties behind the Bayview Hotel, near Soquel Drive. But Pirie wanted residents to express their views. It has been 15 years since public hearings were held regarding the Village's future.

In May, Pirie gathered residents together for two town hall meetings to discuss updating the Aptos Village Plan. Much of the plan has not been implemented, including doing away with some parking on Soquel Drive or extending Granite Way through the vacant lots to Aptos Creek Road. In general, development of any sort has been slow to proceed in and around Aptos Village. But now that lot owners are champing at the bit, the plan is being closely reviewed.

That includes deciding what mix of commercial businesses are needed and are likely to succeed.

The Plan will also decide what kind of retail stores and eateries will be opened — those serving mostly the immediate community or the kind designed to attract customers from throughout the County.

"The last thing we want is a ghost town, businesses that don't make it," said Pirie. "We want it to be successful and vibrant, meeting the community's needs."

Supervisor Said Traffic Congestion is a Problem

Easing traffic will have to be the starting point.

"We are doing a traffic study to see if it would work to put in a new road either from Cathedral Drive to Aptos Creek Road or where Trout Gulch and Cathedral come together to Aptos Creek Road," said Pirie.

While automobile traffic needs

to be addressed — and it is true that a lot of people drive to the village — the area needs to also be more pedestrian friendly, said Pirie. The manner in how that could be achieved, whether it is accomplished through constructing sidewalks or by other means, is under discussion.

"People should be able to walk around there without the risk of being run over."

Historical District Proposed

Another piece of the Aptos Village future could include cashing in on its past by gaining the distinction of historical district. The county's Historic Resources Commission has been studying whether Aptos Village should be the first unincorporated area in Santa Cruz County to be designated a historical district. The district would include parts of Soquel

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Drive, Valencia and Aptos streets along with Trout Gulch Road.

The Village was the center of Aptos when it sprang to life around Frederick Hihn's lumber business in the 1860s.

The area had been geographically isolated, but during the Hihn years, bridges were constructed that linked the Village with nearby communities. But smallpox broke out in Watsonville in 1868, and Santa Cruz residents smashed Aptos's first bridge in a frantic attempt to keep the virus from spreading north. This un-neighboring gesture was not quickly forgotten.

When the lumber was gone, Hihn and the community got by with apple orchards and an apple-packing plant. The plant, located behind the Bayview Hotel, still stands today and houses the Village Fair Antiques shop.

During the 1870s, Hihn spearheaded the construction of a railroad through the town, and the Village boasted a quaint train station. But the changing face of transportation has taken its toll. A bus stop stands in the Station's old spot, and the adjacent shopping center adopted the name Aptos Station.

Yet historians like John Hibble, executive director of the Aptos Chamber of Commerce and Aptos History Museum coordinator, believe that the vintage appearance of buildings like the Station could be integrated into the design of new structures. Hibble envisions a resurrected Station building that could serve multiple purposes, including continued use as a bus stop.

Hibble hopes that new commercial buildings constructed in the vacant lots behind Aptos Station will be designed with architectural traces of the apple drier, vinegar works and packing facility that once existed there.

Yet there's a lot of history hiding in the buildings that still exist in the area. Already 13 buildings in the Village are listed on historic

continued on page 9

COVER

continued from page 15

registers, and another 15 are under consideration.

Each of the buildings which face the Bayview Hotel on Soquel Street have historical status. They are perched on a cliff, though. When the Loma Prieta Earthquake struck in 1989, the ravine swallowed what had been the town's first telephone exchange.

Over on Trout Gulch, the Chez Suzie's building had humble beginnings as a stable, but now bears historical status. What was once the town firehouse has become, suitably, Cole's Barbeque.

There are numerous historical residences in the Village area, particularly in the Hihn Subdivision. The cottage across from the Post Office dates from 1880 and is still a residence. You can find the town's oldest residence next to Aptos Glass, but don't go peeking in the windows — folks still live there.

The Café Sparrow building's roots are about as California as

they come. It was built with cash from gold mining. James Leonard's La Selva Beach mine was yielding good ore at the end of the nineteenth century, and he used the cash to construct the building and start a general store.

Sadly, over the next 40 years the town's population shrank and in the 1960s many buildings were torn down. Even the venerable Bayview Hotel barely escaped demolition.

"If there isn't the vision that the area is historic — than old buildings are just old buildings — and people sometimes want to tear them down or change them," said Hibble, "then the historical character of the district begins to disappear over time."

Hibble said if old buildings aren't decreed historic then property owners sometimes believe it would be more valuable to make them newer in appearance.

Other than preserving the town's storied history, there are also tangible business advantages in having a historical designation.

Property owners of historic sites become eligible for tax cred-

its through a federal park service program. And when it comes to



The Bayview Hotel survived demolition in the 1960s.

renovations, there is special dispensation for historic buildings which allows owners to bring the buildings up to a different standard of codes than modern build-

ings. Also, property values tend to stabilize because a business that is

really out of scale would not be coming in under the designation, said Steve Guiney, staff to the Historic Resources Commission.

Although a historic district

doesn't restrict any particular type of business, it does compel the owner of a historic building to maintain its historic exterior appearance.

Back to the Past?

Not everyone is convinced that a historic district designation is desirable, including Pirie.

At the last meeting with residents and business owners on Dec. 4, the question was posed whether there are significant benefits from having a historic district rather than just an effective Village plan.

For instance, although studies show property values in historic districts increase, what isn't clear, said Guiney, is if that is a result of the historical designation or because a particular area is already on an upswing.

The Planning Commission is expected to make a recommendation to the Board of Supervisor whether to approve the idea early this year.

In the meantime, Pirie said more information is needed before the issue is brought to a vote. □