

Planning
1976-1985

City considers all the angles in tough decision on streets

By KEN McLAUGHLIN

The Union-Alexander Street connection: Mind-boggling boondoggle or sound long-range planning?

That is the question many downtown revitalization devotees are asking themselves these days.

To hook up Alexander and Union Streets, the city of Watsonville plans on spending about \$700,000 of limited redevelopment funds. The project will involve demolition of the Pacific Telephone building on East Beach Street and a net loss of 17 municipal parking spaces.

Designed to improve traffic circulation on the east side of town, the project has long been heralded as a "prerequisite" for downtown redevelopment. Current plans call for reducing Main Street to one lane in each direction, with traffic diverted to Union, Alexander and Brennan Streets on the east side of town and Rodriguez Street on the west side.

The big question, however, is not whether the street realignment should be done — but whether it can be done cheaper, and without knocking down a building.

Opponents of the City Council's plan argue that it's silly to demolish an attractive building when the connection can be made by "bending Union Street around the Valley National Bank, hooking Union with Alexander near the present Beach-Alexander intersection. (See map.)

The decision to punch Union Street through the phone company building was made in 1978. Dissenting were Councilman Frank Osmer and former Councilman Don Sauer.

"I just couldn't see spending all that money to tear down a good building," Osmer said Wednesday in explaining his position.

Agreeing with him at the time of the decision was City Manager Jim Buell, who wanted to see the least expensive alternative used. Buell argued in vain that the city's own traffic and land-use consultants had suggested that route.

One major concern of the city manager and redevelopment advocates was that the city would be depleting almost all of the city's redevelopment funds — which come from property taxes — for a road project.

The passage of time has done little to assuage the critics. "There's an awful lot of people objecting to tearing down that building," said Councilman Vido Deretich Wednesday.

Because of the lingering doubts, the Register-Pajaronian this week reviewed the files on the project at City Hall and asked city officials to justify the council's decision.

The investigation revealed that neither of the two proposed routes is clearly the best. Each has its salient advantages and disadvantages.

Public works officials, who were assured anonymity to promote candor, said there's no doubt that the best route from an engineering standpoint is the one chosen by the council. It will move traffic more quickly and efficiently than the other alternative.

At the same time, the public works personnel have no doubt that the other alternative would work. Indeed, the staff pointed out, consulting traffic engineer D. Jackson Faustman recommended in 1974 in a written report that the city undertake a realignment project similar to the one proposed by the council's critics.

But there's one big hitch in that proposal. Faustman said that to "insure a tolerable angle" at the intersection of the new street and Beach Street, the city would have to purchase a small portion of the Valley National Bank building or the Codiga building (formerly occupied by the Rexall drug store) at Alexander and Beach Streets.

If the city follows that recommendation, then the difference in cost between the alternatives might be negligible.

According to Finance Director John Radin, the new street would cut so closely to the Codiga building that owner Bill Codiga would probably receive a hefty sum for damage to his parcel. In addition, the city might have to force Valley National to move its vault — also an expensive proposition. The cost of land acquisition could easily approach \$570,000, the amount the city spent on the project now in the works. And, Radin points out, the end result would "not move traffic" as well.

"If the project costs a million dollars and moves traffic, then it's worth it," said Radin. "If it doesn't move traffic, then we might as well forget redevelopment."

But public works officials have serious doubts about whether the project will ever "move traffic quickly and efficiently. They noted that pedestrians are continually crossing Union Street near the plaza to get to and from the post office and library. This makes it undesirable to move traffic quickly, they contended.

In addition, the staff pointed out, stop signs or traffic signals will have to be installed at the new intersection on Beach Street, and motorists will again have to stop at the intersection of Alexander and East Lake Avenue.

For these reasons, public works officials wonder whether a more economical route (which avoids cutting into the bank building or Codiga building) could be found.

But Radin feels that eventually the street would work well as a traffic corridor if synchronized traffic lights are installed. "And the post office (now operating out of cramped quarters) won't be there forever," he remarked.

One rumor circulating in City Hall is that the council chose to knock down the

phone company building because it didn't want to deal with Bill Codiga, considered a "tough guy to deal with."

Radin, however, scoffs at the rumor. "The council would deal with anybody if it's in the best interests of the city," he said.

Codiga, contacted this week, agreed that the council made the best decision.

"They (city officials) has a highly qualified appraiser," he said.

There has been concern that the demolition of the phone company would look hideous aesthetically, creating an "island" where Codiga's building sits. But the Watsonville attorney said that didn't agree with that assessment. He said the rear of his building will be transformed "into something nice," through landscaping or other means.

Codiga contended that even if the cost of the proposed alignment exceeds the "alternative" alignment, it's still the best way to go. Praising city fathers for being "forward-looking," he argued that "the city deserves the right kind of traffic plan."

The phone company, meanwhile, is moving ahead with plans to move into new quarters at the northeast corner of Brennan and East Lake Avenue, where two older homes sit. (One of the homes is now occupied by the Legal Aid Society.)

Under present plans, a new building would be constructed by a private developer and leased to Pacific Telephone.

Bill Gil, of the company's real estate division in San Jose, said this morning that plans have "reached the final stage," but that "nothing's been signed."

The lease on the city-owned building (bought two years ago for \$450,000) expires in May 1982, but city fathers are hoping the phone company will move earlier.

In hindsight, almost everybody agrees that Union Street should have been extended when the old bowling alley burned down in the early '60s — before the new phone company building was constructed.

At that time, however, the words downtown revitalization hadn't yet become part of the Watsonville vernacular.

REFERENCE

