

Aptos site zone change wins panel's endorsement

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SANTA CRUZ — The standing-room-only crowd got what it wanted from the county Planning Commission on Wednesday during what some commissioners called an "unusual" and "very interesting" public hearing.

After two hours of testimony supporting the rezoning of land considered a key piece of real estate, commissioners voted unanimously to recommend that the Board of Supervisors downzone the McGregor-Sea Ridge parcel to visitor accommodation. That designation is the most restrictive of the commercial zones, and limits use to hotels, motels, bed-and-breakfast inns and recreational and tent camping parks.

Commissioners Robert Bremner and Denise Holbert remarked that it was odd to hold a hearing where there was public consensus.

The hearing was held after community members and organizations joined forces to fight the 1994 community commercial zoning of the vacant three-acre site near Seacliff State Beach, which leaves the parcel open to the building of retail stores.

They also lobbied for a neighborhood park on the site and for a one-year moratorium on development in the area.

"If we don't take the responsibility to protect (the community), who will?" asked Pepper Goleish, a member of the Coalition to Save Seacliff/Aptos and a 20-year resident.

Development foes collected between 1,500 and 2,000 signatures last November to stop a strip mall proposed by builder Barry Swenson, and urged a re-zoning to visitor accommodation.

The property was recently purchased by the Kumar family, San Jose hotel owners who were represented at the meeting by local land use planner Richard Beale. Beale, who was hired by the developers two days ago, said the Kumars know that Seacliff is a "special place."

The nine-acre property, divided into three parcels, is located in Aptos at the intersection of McGregor and Sea Ridge drives near Highway 1. It has been zoned for commercial use for 23 of the past 25 years, and was rezoned from visitor accommodation to community commercial in 1994.

There has never been an application to develop the property, said Glenda Hill of the county planning department.

Of the five options they presented, planning department staff recommended a tourist commercial zoning, which allows visitor accommodations, restaurants, and service stations.

Critics warned of the adverse impact mini-markets and large-scale developments have on the village atmosphere, including traffic, loitering, and the burden to local water supplies.

Planning staff oppose that designation because they said without a market study, it is unclear if the site would be economically feasible.

Commissioners will also recommend that planning staff work with Seacliff residents to prepare a community plan within a year to pull together what many feel is runaway, haphazard development.

They will also recommend that the board enact an interim ordinance to review development applications that could impact the community plan.

Beale said he was not sure how the Kumars will react to the recommendation.