

Beach area decision draws near

Beach Flats

Council hears comments from the public tonight

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SANTA CRUZ — Hundreds of supporters and opponents of a controversial plan to add more businesses and hotels near the Boardwalk and redevelop some housing in Beach Flats are expected to voice their opinions before the City Council tonight.

The Beach and South of Laurel Area Plan will be the subject of two nights of discussion and debate among residents and the council. Tonight's meeting begins at 7 p.m. at the Civic Auditorium, 307 Church St., and where the Council will hear public comments. Thursday's meeting is scheduled for council deliberation and possible action. The council is also reserving Oct. 6 for more deliberation if needed.

If the final environmental impact report and project plan is adopted, it will allow the city to begin the proposed rezoning of some areas, including south of Laurel. In addition, the city will ask the Coastal Commission for certification at a later date.

The council's action, however, will not result in the direct development of any property. Any such development — such as the housing or extension of the Boardwalk — would have to go through normal planning procedures and be approved by the Planning Commission and City Council.

Part of the plan includes adding a 125,000-square-foot commercial center, realigning Third Street and rebuilding some homes there, a new park and a 250-room hotel and expansion of the Boardwalk.

Although the plan has been talked about and debated for more than 10 years, the city and officials with the Santa Cruz Redevelopment Agency got serious in March 1996 when the agency initiated the EIR process and hired consultants to see that process through. Last month, the final EIR was approved and slightly modified by the Planning Commission.

Now the matter is before the Council for a decision.

Opponents of the project include organized groups like the Beach Area Working Group, which has attempted to raise more than \$20,000 to campaign against the project. In addition, last week eight former Santa Cruz mayors turned in a letter to the City Council urging the project be slowed down to include more citizen input.

But supporters of the plan, including such well-known progressives as Darrell Darling and Councilman Scott Kennedy, say approval of the project does not mean the individual project proposals will get approval. Council meetings are normally held in City Hall's council chambers, but because of heavy citizen interest, the meeting is being held in Civic Auditorium across the street.

The meeting will have Spanish translation available.