



SPECIAL TO THE MERCURY NEWS

A four-story office and retail building is proposed for a vacant lot on Pacific Avenue.

Pacific Ave.

Pacific Avenue project on agenda

By David L. Beck
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One of the last big empty spaces on Pacific Avenue will be filled with a gray four-story office and retail building, if the city council gives the project a thumbs-up Tuesday night.

That's a big if, though. The project, planned for a vacant lot at Church Street and Pacific, already has been roughed up by the zoning board.

The board wants property owner Louis Rittenhouse to lower the rooftop tower, add bicycle parking, use "genuine masonry materials" instead of stucco, do something about what it called "the excessive embellishment," put in more windows — and, oh yes, get rid of that flagpole.

"I had an opportunity to meet five people who didn't like the design," said Rittenhouse. "Unfortunately, they all happened to be members of the zoning board."

To comply with the city's Downtown Recovery Plan, Rittenhouse has lowered the tower to 75 feet and lowered the top of the fourth floor 20 inches to 60 feet.

The flagpole? Gone. "Actually it was a secret radio transmitter," he joked, "but we've been discovered and we're taking it down."

The lot covers nearly 20,000 square feet. Until the earthquake of 1989, it held three small buildings.

In the past it has been proposed as a downtown plaza, but Rittenhouse had no interest in selling it to the city. Nor could plaza backers on the city council muster enough votes to condemn the land under an eminent domain procedure.

PROJECT | Council to consider four-story office-retail plan

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The Downtown Recovery Plan was adopted after the earthquake and amended substantially last October. It lays down guidelines for what can go on Pacific Avenue with or without various special permits.

For example, it frowns upon offices and medical clinics at street level, where it calls for retail. But, in a change inspired by Borders' move into Santa Cruz, it also requires large retailers — more than 16,000 square feet — to obtain a special-use permit based on whether the proposal is a "desired" business that adds to the diversity and balance of downtown retail. Rittenhouse has said he hopes to lure a small department store.

The downtown plan even details preferred building materials — including stucco, which the zoning board disliked.

After years of watching city officials try to fit specific projects into the template, said Acting Planning Director Gene Arner, "I've come to the conclusion that beauty's in the eye

of the beholder." He compared the plan to the Bible: "You can find anything you want in there."

Rittenhouse is no stranger to downtown politics.

He labored for years to steer another of his downtown projects, the triangular Flatiron building at the north end of Pacific, through the sticky approval process. It was built in 1998.

He was elected to the city council after the 1989 Loma Prieta earthquake, only to find himself often barred by conflict-of-interest rules from discussing or voting on downtown issues.

And this isn't his first proposal for the Church Street lot. Plans for a five-story building — with granite, not stucco — went through more than 30 revisions, he said, before going nowhere.

He's philosophical about Tuesday night's hearing. "It'll be a great cricket match," he said. "Bring your score card."

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