

Santa Cruz weighs beachside center

Hotels & Boarding
FIRST OF TWO HEARINGS TONIGHT
ON \$100 MILLION HOTEL PROJECT

By Ken McLaughlin
Mercury News

Three decades ago, a sleeping giant awoke to crush a proposed hotel and conference center on Lighthouse Field in Santa Cruz. That awakening was a defining moment for the environmental movement then beginning to cascade across California.

Fast forward to 2005, and see that Santa

House
Cruz's main beach area has retained its 1950s feel — a look some call "quaint," others "retro shabby."

But perhaps not for long.

Tonight, the Santa Cruz City Council will kick off a marathon two-night public hearing before voting on whether to approve a \$100 million hotel and conference center — the city's most ambitious beachside redevelopment proposal since the Lighthouse Field project failed in 1974.

The plan is to replace the aging 163-room

11805
Coast Santa Cruz Hotel, formerly the Dream Inn, with a modern 270-room hotel. The city would own a six-level parking garage and conference center across the street.

For some Santa Cruzans, the white-hot debate over the proposal echoes the controversy over the doomed Lighthouse project. But backers of the project say that anti-growth attitudes are bankrupting Santa

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Cruz, which has had to slash 70 municipal jobs in the past few years. The city, proponents argue, needs to "get real," economically, at least.

Socialist Mayor Mike Rotkin, a veteran of the battle to save Lighthouse Field, scoffed at the comparison between the two projects.

"The Lighthouse Field project was a convention center holding 10,000 people," he said. "This is a conference center with maximum 1,200 seating."

Dream Inn site

Besides, Rotkin and other supporters say, Lighthouse Field was and is one of the most pristine spots within a city on the California coast. The revitalized Coast Santa Cruz Hotel would be built on the site of the Dream Inn — the name still preferred by nearly everyone in town. Overlooking Cowell Beach and the municipal wharf, the hotel is a 10-story monstrosity that looks as if it were designed by communist architects from East Berlin.

"A lot of conservationists have long wished they could blow it up," said Don Lane, a former mayor who now heads



the Community Coalition for the Hotel Conference Center.

But the project's opponents argue that leveling the inn shouldn't obscure the reality that the proposed four new hotel buildings will be "bulky" and so un-Santa Cruz. The parking garage will cast double-wide shadows on the Clearview Court mobile home park, opponents complain.

Christopher Krohn — another former mayor — says that progressives are "fighting for the political heart and

soul of Santa Cruz — again."

"People who are biking, walking or jogging near the hotel should imagine what the area will look like with a six-story parking structure," he said. "It's like building a temple to the automobile."

'Pragmatic socialism'

Opponents say the project is symbolic of the council's newfound attachment to "pragmatic socialism," or "realistic progressivism." But city officials, saying they're fighting for more money to properly fund public safety and social services, make no apologies. They praise the hotel owner, the Northwest Hospitality Group of Idaho, as an ideal partner, willing to compromise to make bicycle paths wider and views of the Pacific more spectacular.

Gary Patton, the former Santa Cruz County supervisor who rose to local prominence as the attorney defending Lighthouse Field, said the city simply needs to be more fiscally cautious.

"If private enterprise isn't willing to do this, then why is the city doing this?" he asked. "If it doesn't work, it would be terrible."

The city plans to sell \$30 million in bonds to finance the

project. And the hotel owner has agreed to sweeten the deal by collecting the equivalent of a 14 percent hotel tax, 4 percentage points higher than hotels in the rest of the city.

The project will cost the city money during construction — expected to take at least two years. But once the hotel is up and running in four or five years, City Manager Dick Wilson says, it will "conservatively" net \$500,000 a year in taxes.

Maggie Ivy, CEO of the Santa Cruz County Conference and Visitors Council, said the city's tourism industry has long suffered because a "Memorial to Labor Day economy" isn't enough. She said it needs a conference center to spur the winter tourist trade.

"It's a lost opportunity that costs us dearly year after year," Ivy said.

IF YOU'RE INTERESTED

Tonight's public hearing begins at 7 at the city council chamber, 809 Center St. Wednesday's hearing begins at 7 p.m. at the Civic Auditorium, 307 Church St.

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