

Local news

Beach Flats Council reviews beach plan

By KAREN CLARK
Sentinel staff writer

SANTA CRUZ — A disagreement over how much housing to pack into a redeveloped Beach Flats nearly derailed the review of a plan for the beach area that has been in the works some three years.

Five City Council members made it through only nine pages of the nearly 80-page draft of the Beach Area Plan on Tuesday before it became evident a basic tenet of the document did not have unanimous support.

Councilwomen Jane Yokoyama and Katherine Beiers said the notion that developers could build up to 54 housing units per acre could ruin the neighborhood.

"If it's too high ... it won't be long before it's unlivable and it will be commercial down there," Beiers said. "I want to revisit how dense it should go down there."

Under the current plan, the city's carrot for developers would be the ability to build a large number of apartments on some lots, but only if they guarantee that a fixed number of those apartments would be affordable.

Councilman Scott Kennedy pointed out that current incentives available to developers in Beach Flats have resulted in little new housing. He also noted that this issue was hashed out by the previous council.

Council members used such terms as 'cash cows' and 'slums' to describe some Beach Flats housing.

"If all bets are off, let's pull the plug on it (the Beach Area Plan) and admit it," Kennedy said. "I'd rather us drop back ... than have it just be who can marshal the votes and march forward."

Mayor Mike Rotkin eventually succeeded in getting agreement from the council members — who were meeting as members of the Redevelopment and Beach Area committees — on several key goals of the plan:

- When redevelopment is completed, there will be no fewer bedrooms than exist now in the Beach area (which includes Beach Flats, Beach Hill, River Flats and the south of Laurel Street areas).

Council members said that may mean fewer bedrooms in Beach Flats, but that would be balanced by new units in the other areas.

- Any developer who wants to build the maximum 54 units per acre must agree that 25 percent of them

will be affordable to low-income residents.

- There must be some kind of requirement that property owners adequately manage their rental houses or apartments.

The council has been struggling for years with ways to improve the dilapidated and overcrowded conditions in Beach Flats without eliminating homes for people who have nowhere else to go.

Council members used such terms as "cash cows" and "slums" to describe some of the housing available in Beach Flats, where some landlords allow multiple families to live illegally in small, rundown homes to maximize profits.

"The affordable housing we're protecting is not livable housing," Kennedy said, adding that when he joined the council in 1990 he was "embarrassed to see the kind of 'affordable housing' progressives were protecting" in Beach Flats.

As a result, that council began a redevelopment process for Beach Flats that eventually was put on the back burner in favor of a more comprehensive plan that would include the entire beach area.

It's the draft of that plan council committees now are considering.

The next joint meeting of the council's Redevelopment and Beach Area committees will be at 10 a.m. April 2 in the upstairs meeting room of the downtown public library, 224 Church St.