

Mayor proposes that the city sell Porter Building

By KEN McLAUGHLIN

When Bill Johnston speaks, City Council members listen.

At least that's how it was Tuesday night, when the mayor suggested that the city sell the Porter Building and the Porter-Pfingst Building — and use the money to build a second-story to the city's new police station. The additional floor would house city offices in the future.

"We're going to need growth space," Johnston said.

When the council decided last month to build the police station at Central Avenue and Union Street, it also talked about plans to construct a second-story. But the idea was quickly put aside, since the city didn't have the money.

But now that private investors are interested in restoring the Porter and Porter-Pfingst buildings for commercial use, the council thinks it can make money on structures it once wanted to demolish.

Johnston said he'd still like to see the buildings come down to make way for the police station and municipal offices. But since the council has chosen another site for the station, the mayor reasoned, "Let's sell the whole thing."

Several other council members said they agreed with the mayor's thinking. But at the suggestion of Councilmen Charles Palmtag, the council elected to wait two weeks to give the city staff time to evaluate the plan — and determine the worth of the two buildings.

The city bought the Porter Building 10 years ago for \$90,000. The Porter-Pfingst Building was bought last year for \$45,000. (It's estimated the second-story on the police station would cost \$500,000.)

Two development firms, Hoffman and Associates and Pacific Sun Properties, sent representatives to the council meeting Tuesday night to express their interest in revitalizing the two buildings. (Hoffman and Associates is also interested in obtaining the Boys Club Building.)

Roger Hoffman told the council that a structural engineer recently remarked to him that the Porter Building is in much "better shape than the Mansion House," which Hoffman and Associates is now restoring to the tune of \$1.5 million.

The firm would like to buy the Porter Building for \$10 — the rationale for the nominal cost being that the city once planned on paying someone to tear it down. The land would either be leased or sold.

Mayor Johnston, however, commented that the city would not sell the building "for \$10 like Roger wants." It's the mayor's opinion that the city could get more.

Jim Krause of Pacific Sun Properties of Soquel told the council that he felt rehabilitation of the Porter Building would "get the ball rolling" on revitalization of lower Main Street.

One suggestion of the city staff is to sell the building and lease the land, giving the city the "first option" to buy the structure when it comes back on the market or when the lease is up.

But Councilman Vido Deretich bristled at the suggestion, contending that it would be ridiculous to sell a building "the city already has," then pay a high price to buy it back in the future.

If the council were to do that, said Deretich, "We ought to be charged with treason."

The councilman suggested that the building be spruced up "just enough to make it usable." But he said he couldn't understand why anyone would want to spend over a half-million dollars to rehabilitate "that old barn (the Porter Building)."

Both Hoffman and Krause explained, however, that if the building is listed on the National Register of Historic Places, then rehabilitation would be economically feasible because of tax laws favoring historic preservation. Hoffman commented that "you could not build a new building of the same square footage for half a million dollars."

Roger's brother, Jeff, explained that a revitalized Porter Building would essentially be a new building "within an old building."

George Kypuros, vice-president of the Watsonville Area Development Corporation, suggested that a committee be formed consisting of two members of the council, two city staff members and two members of the development corporation. The committee would search for a way to restore the building in a way acceptable to all parties involved.

Council members indicated that they liked the proposal, but decided to wait two weeks (for the city staff's report on selling the two buildings) before appointing the city's representatives to the committee.

In other business Tuesday night, the council:

—Heard from consulting engineer Chris Kahr that the state Water Resources Control Board has most likely denied an appeal by the Sierra Club regarding the granting of a five-year permit to the city to discharge sewage into Monterey Bay. The Club had wanted a moratorium on building until the city's sewage treatment plant is upgraded.

—Directed the city staff to find an alternative to rerouting Highway 152, now on Main Street. The council had wanted the highway relocated to Airport Boulevard and Holohan Road, but the cost is too high (\$1.25 million) and the state transportation department says it won't pay for the rerouting. The most promising alternative involves locating the highway on Riverside Drive and Rodriguez Street.

—Gave their blessing to a plan by Naturipe Berry Growers to build a new food processing plant on Industrial Road that will employ about 100 people during the summer months.

—Postponed discussion on a proposed historic preservation ordinance. The matter was the last item on the agenda, and the council ran out of time.

—Agreed with City Manager Jim Buell that it was no longer necessary to consider making the Freedom Library part of the Watsonville Library, since the Friends of the Freedom Library have worked out an arrangement with school trustees to put the library in Freedom School. In addition, the county Board of Supervisors Tuesday agreed to fund the library until July 1, Buell pointed out. "The problem seems to have worked itself out," the city manager said.

—Accepted a bid for \$95,908 for a new "triple combination pumping engine" for the Fire Department.

—Agreed with Councilman Ann Soldo that a sentence in the minutes for the council meeting of Feb. 26 didn't make sense. The sentence read: "The ordinance, which was defeated, was adopted..."

—Denied a claim by Beatrice Gonzales and Margaret Buckman, of 48 Packard Lane, for \$20,000. The woman allege that work performed by Taylor Construction Co., in conjunction with the city's housing rehabilitation program, was negligently performed.

—Wished Planning Director Bob Ellenwood a happy 60th birthday.

REFERENCE

[REDACTED]