



JENNIFER WALTERS

**IF THEY BUILD IT ...?** The corner of Lincoln and Cedar streets could look dramatically different in the future.

*Farmer's Market*

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# Taking the Farm

Proposed multi-level parking garage may spell trouble for downtown Farmers' Market | by Hunter Holcombe

In yet another battle in the war between old and new Santa Cruz, a longtime city institution may be forced to find a new home if a proposed multi-story parking structure gets the go-ahead.

The Downtown Santa Cruz Farmers' Market, the largest of three in the county, and the only one that is open year-round, has been an eclectic cocktail party of local farmers, fresh food aficionados and assorted downtown eccentrics for nearly 15 years.

The popular market, which convenes every Wednesday afternoon in the parking lot of Lincoln and Cedar streets, is as much an opportunity for locals to shop for fresh produce and food directly from small farmers as it is a thriving social scene for regulars; an open air market that is as fun-in-the-sun as it is functional.

"The Farmers' Market provides a bridge between local agriculture and the community," says Naish Dhillon, manager of the Downtown Farmers' Market. "And the downtown market is a unique one—its energy and vibe are different from a lot of other markets."

The flipside of this idyllic scene is the reality of a Santa Cruz that continues to grow and, as it does, its traffic, housing and parking steadily worsens.

Because of the increasing need for more parking, the city's Downtown Commission has recently eyed the large, city-owned parking lot as a prime location for a six level mixed-use parking garage, in combination with 32 housing units and 1,400 sq. ft. of street level commercial space.

According to Santa Cruz City parking programs manager Matt Farrell, the commission favors the proposed project over an alternative to tearing down the existing two-story parking structure at Cedar and Church Streets and building a larger one.

"They preferred this one in terms of cost efficiency and ability to create more supply and to balance the supply [downtown]," Farrell says.

While the commission has unanimously recommended to the City Council that the site is the best location for a new parking structure, the project is still in its infancy.

According to Farrell, the commission is currently forming a finance task force to examine the affordability of such a project. Because it is only in a conceptual phase, the estimate of 743 parking spaces (one basement level and 5 above) is used as a maximum. As a comparison, the proposed structure would be similar in size to the paid parking structure at Cedar and Locust streets. Depending on community and business input, however, as well as financial restrictions, the project may be downgraded from there. In addition, in order to pay for the project, Farrell says parking rates in the city will most likely need to be increased. Once the scope of the project is known and rate increases are figured, public input from the downtown community may reduce or even put a halt to the project. "The first thing to figure out is what is reasonable for the people who will use it—the downtown business community and employees," Farrell says. "People might say we don't want it."

The estimate for 32 residential units does not yet detail what type of housing would go in, but they would most likely look out over Cedar Street.



**MARKET MATTERS** Should a parking structure rise where the current downtown Santa Cruz Farmers' Market sets up shop, vendors will have to adjust to a new locale.

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If the final plans for the structure are approved by the City Council, bids will go out and the city will reach an agreement with a private builder. Because of these numerous stages, Farrell estimates that groundbreaking would not begin for a year-and-a-half to two years.

Because the Farmers' Market operates on the parking lot via a special use permit, the city is not beholden to them in any way. Technically, although the market has been held at its current location for the last decade, it is still only considered a special event. But, because the market is so successful and popular, Farrell says the city will do everything possible to accommodate their existence.

The president of the Farmers' Market board of directors, Joe Curry, has applied for a position on the finance commission, and Farrell says he would be surprised if that request is denied. In the end, however, assuming the project goes through, the market will have no choice to but find a new location to call home.

“We haven’t considered [another location] yet,” Dhillon says. “But there are a couple spots that are reasonable—we might even end up on the [Pacific Garden] Mall again.”

Dhillon says he’s not worried about the market’s future. With the city’s strong support and the will of market organizers, he says a solution is inevitable. “It is imperative that farmers’ markets survive,” he says. “It is the easiest way for people to shop, it is the most familiar, and for the farmers it is easiest too. If the farmers’ markets do not survive, then small acreage farms would never be able to exist.”