

# Convention Site Downtown Queried

9-15-77

By PAUL BEATTY  
Sentinel Staff Writer

While County Supervisor Gary Patton is getting commendations for moving in support of a convention center here, his idea for location along Front Street has raised a number of concerns among businessmen and city officials.

Topping the list of concerns is the possible loss of more parking spaces in downtown Santa Cruz, a shopping center that is already short of parking, according to City Parking Commissioner Bob Fuller.

Patton agrees, "That is the most substantial difficulty to overcome—to integrate adequate parking into this plan.

"To solve that problem we would have to work on it, and then money could solve it," Patton said.

Further concerns revolve around the use of valuable downtown acreage for the convention center and the ability of the city center area to draw tourists, compared to the attraction of the beaches and ocean.

"I'm not in agreement with what he proposes. It takes land that is too valuable and we should locate a conference center closer to the beach where the recreational facilities are much better," business leader Ken Ferguson, who was involved in the previous convention movement here, told the Sentinel.

He added, "I think it is commendable that  
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Gary is putting himself on a pro-convention platform—he's to be commended for that."

Patton's suggestion is that a 200-room hotel and conference center for groups up to 1,000 should be built along the west side of Front Street in the area where the county jail and city parking lots exist between the Octagon Museum-Soquel Avenue. The jail will be emptied when the Water Street jail is built across from the county center courthouse.

Ferguson's comments were echoed by Samuel Leask III, also a major mover for a convention center here for more than 10 years. Leask said a convention of 1,000 persons could mean 500 automobiles, and doubted whether a private hotel firm could be convinced on placing a center at the jail/parking site. Leask mentioned the area across from the Boardwalk, east of Raymond Street, but acknowledged that housing displacement problems would have to be overcome under such a plan.

Patton also suggests that Front Street in the mentioned area be converted into a mall, and that a performing arts building could be built on the other side of the street, between the existing double-decker parking lot and San Lorenzo Plaza.

The area he suggests for the performing arts center presently is in the plans of the Swenson Company to build a Ford Department store, according to City Public Works Director Bill Fieberling.

"My feeling is that the convention center should be near a beach, but the Swenson Company proposal is the proper use for that (Front Street area) parcel," Fieberling said.

Councilman Bert Muhly said that a convention center on either, or both, sides of Front Street is an alternative that the city council should consider when looking at the Swenson proposal.

He said that his concept of a center should

be of a modest size that "could double as a culture center for the people who live here 365 days a year."

Councilman John Mahaney commented, "I couldn't see it (Patton's suggestion) as planned, but I appreciate his coming up with the suggestion."

Mahaney tempered his appreciation, "It may be part of his trying to turn down the recall, it may be political—he's changing. I think he's trying to change his image."

Nearly every person responding to Patton's proposal had their own choice of sites for a convention center.

Fieberling would like to see it on the west side of Beach Street, across from the Dream Inn hotel; Ferguson would choose the area off Beach Street, between Riverside Avenue and San Lorenzo River; Fuller, speaking personally and not as a member of the parking commission, would locate it about midway between the beach and Pacific Garden Mall; one of Mahaney's choices would be a modest size center "in a corner of Lighthouse Field."

At one time, Lighthouse Field was the destined location of a major convention/shopping center. However, that proposal was turned down by city voters in 1964 in a campaign in which Patton was a leader in its defeat.

Supervisor Ed Borovatz, a member of the Conference-Performing Arts Committee which heard Patton's proposal this week, said, "The site is the major political problem we have to solve."

He said the existence of the committee should be decided on whether it can find a site that will be supported by both the city and county governments.

"It seems you don't have to convince anybody of the need; it's the site we must agree on . . . and then the site will dictate what you can have there," Borovatz said.