

Details hound beach project

Key elements of proposal face opposition

Beach Flats

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SANTA CRUZ — City Council members are expected to approve a controversial plan to remake the long-neglected beach area when it comes before them in October.

The real question is whether the council can do anything in the next two months to blunt criticism that the plan offers the moon but will deliver a mess.

"The challenge to the council now is to shore up the details," said Councilman Scott Kennedy, an ar-



Wormhoudt

Former mayor has expressed several concerns about the beach-area plan.

dent supporter of the plan. "Until we nail that down, it just doesn't work for the council to say, 'Trust us.'"

The plan, officially known as the Beach and South of Laurel Comprehensive Area Plan, provides an outline for residential and commercial development in

the area for the next 20 years. Specific projects allowed by the plan's guidelines still would have to come to the council for approval.

On Thursday, the Planning Commission stamped its OK on the plan, paving the way for a final vote of the City Council in October after public hearings in September.

Mardi Wormhoudt, a former City Council member who now represents Santa Cruz on the county Board of Supervisors, opened Thursday's meeting with a list of concerns, including what she believed to be a lack of widespread knowledge about the soon-to-be-approved plan.

"Think about developing a com-

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munity constituency for this plan," said Wormhoudt, who was involved in the Vision Santa Cruz process that helped shape the future post-earthquake downtown.

Doug Rand, co-founder of the Beach Area Working Group, which opposes key portions of the plan, agreed with Wormhoudt.

In a letter to the Planning Commission delivered before members began deliberating, Rand asked the group "to reject the plan and open the process up for meaningful public participation."

He added, "There is universal acknowledgment and the 'political will' to change the conditions in the beach area, but not at the price of large-scale development and questionable public benefits as proposed in the ... plan."

Wormhoudt had similar concerns, including:

- The environmental impact of thousands of new vehicle trips into the area during peak times after the plan reaches build-out.
- Confusing housing policies.
- The fact that only one affordable-housing project has been identified so far.
- The 125-foot roller coaster proposed as part of the Seaside Co.'s expansion of the Boardwalk.
- The size of the proposed 250- to 275-room hotel-conference center, which she said was inappropriate for the Beach Street site. She noted that the nearby West Coast Santa Cruz Hotel (the former Dream Inn) has only 160 rooms.
- The "staggering" amount of proposed retail development. She pointed out that the 125,000-square-foot development on Beach Street could compete with downtown, which has 280,000 square feet of retail space by comparison.

In an attempt to reassure the commission, staff said the retail development on Beach Street would not be an outlet center, as had been considered early in the process.

In fact, there may be a chance that the development site could be used for a community performing arts center, which would be surrounded by small boutiques.

That proposal, however, may fail because of the already congested traffic conditions in the area that would be worsened by making it a destination point for residents.

As a whole, however, the beach-area plan has enough council support to pass, agreed Councilwoman Katherine Beiers, who has raised several concerns about the proposal.

"I just want to make sure the whole community understands the plan," said Beiers. "And if they do, and they want it, then fine."

Despite their disagreements about aspects of the beach-area plan, both Beiers and Kennedy agree on key points, including realigning Third Street to enlarge the Seaside Co.'s river-side parking lot.

In exchange for more space to expand the Boardwalk, the Seaside Co. would be expected to help the city pay for the realignment, as well as provide a site on the other side of Third Street for an affordable housing project in Beach Flats.

The city's Redevelopment Agency already has set aside nearly \$1 million help Mercy Charities Housing California build an 28-unit affordable housing complex on that site.

People whose homes are demolished by the Third Street realignment

would have first dibs on one of the affordable units.

The City Council already has voted to delay the realignment until the affordable housing complex is built. Planning commissioners made the same demand Thursday.

Kennedy said making sure that affordable housing project is built early in the process is one way the city can reassure skeptics who believe the plan gives away the store to business interests without safeguarding the needs of low-income Beach Flats residents.

Kennedy said other assurances the council should make before beach-area redevelopment projects are approved include:

- Finding new, permanent homes for both the Beach Flats community center and the community garden.
- Negotiating a deal with the Seaside Co. that's clearly outlines the public benefits the public will get in exchange for allowing the Boardwalk to expand 1.4 acres into the newly re-configured parking lot.

Kennedy said he thinks "substantial progress" on both issues will be achieved before the beach-area makeover gets under way.

Beiers said she hopes the council also deals realistically with the traffic and parking problems that will be created by a rejuvenated beachfront.

"I just cannot imagine ... having that without doing a lot more work on the shuttle system," said Beiers.

Planning commissioners felt the same way. They suggested the city not move ahead with some of the more traffic-producing projects until an effective transportation-management

plan is a success.

Staff said the city is considering buying a parcel on Ocean Street to use as a remote parking lot in connection with the weekend shuttle system. There also have been talks with county officials about using the County Government Center lot on weekends.

The city already has earmarked money to buy the old rail depot site on Washington Street, a portion of which will be turned into a parking lot.

Beiers also said the city must carefully scrutinize the proposed 250- to 275-room hotel-conference center at the historic La Bahia site on Beach Street.

Staff has acknowledged that any successful development proposal must retain any historic characteristics of La Bahia that remain. In addition, the public has made it clear that a massive-looking project on that site would not be acceptable.

Educating the community about this and other aspects of the plan is becoming an important piece of the approval process.

Council members have been concerned about what they call the "misinformation" being circulated by opponents.

As a result, a new group called the Coalition for the Beach Area has been formed.

"Many people have been working for years on a plan which addresses both the residential needs for affordable housing and neighborhood improvement," said businessman Pravin Patel, a founding member of the coalition. "In the absence of such a comprehensive plan, slow decay of the quality of life will likely continue."