



BIG INN THE BEGUINE A computer-generated image of the new La Bahia Hotel proposed for Beach Street in Santa Cruz

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Raising La Behemoth

Four-star conflict on the waterfront **BY CURTIS CARTIER**

Hotels and Boarding Houses

While it seems everyone has an opinion on whether a massive seven-story, 125-room hotel is the right thing to replace the dilapidated La Bahia Apartments on Beach Street, the only opinion not being aired is the one that says "leave it be."

The crumbling facade, chipped paint and blasted stairways of the current complex have been called an embarrassment by both supporters and opponents of Barry Swenson Builder's plan to turn the property into a four-star resort loosely based on the current historical building's design. And after two heated city meetings that saw the plan called everything from "a brilliant eye catcher" to "a mess and an assault on Santa Cruz's proud heritage," it looks like whatever happens, the La Bahia Apartments, as they stand now, are on borrowed time.

Proponents of the plan say a grand hotel is exactly the kind of revenue-generating job maker that the beachfront and Beach Flats community needs. Opponents point to the historical landmark status of the current structure and the monolithlike southern towers of the proposed hotel, which would

stand 73 feet high and dwarf its First Street neighbors.

The score for the project stands tied 1-1 headed to the final quarter, with the Historical Preservation Commission having voted unanimously against the project at a July 30 meeting and the city's Planning Commission having swung slightly in favor of it (3-2) on Aug. 7.

The tie breaker will come Sept. 9, when the City Council members return from their August break to weigh the HPC and Planning Commission's recommendations, listen to the numerous neighbors, business owners and concerned residents who will undoubtedly speak, then make the final call on whether the new hotel is worth firing up the bulldozers for.

Emotional Preservation Commission

Barry Swenson's plans for La Bahia are seven years in the making, and several incarnations of blueprints have seen the walls of the council chambers. Those walls got a little muddy at the latest Historical

Preservation Commission meeting when, five hours into the session and nearing 12:30am, the conference descended into pouting frowns and cranky bickering.

Though the commissioners found a way to argue among themselves since early evening, their unanimous vote against the hotel plans showed they were just finding different ways to say the same thing.

"The plan offers us no option for preserving any or all of the existing landmark. How can we support something like that?" HPC chairman David Subocz asked a tired and slightly giddy audience.

The five-hour marathon meeting saw presentations by an outside consulting firm that completed an Environmental Impact Report, followed by another presentation by Jesse Nickell, VP at Barry Swenson, and an endless parade of maps, charts and bullet-pointed facts from the HPC.

In almost childlike moments of ego-flexing, HPC commissioners Subocz and Ross Gibson squabbled over off-topic items such as whose motion came first, other zoning plans and whether or not the commission was going off-topic.

And although finally—around 12:45pm—the commission enthusiastically shot the project down, opinion in the room was far from one-sided. And it wasn't just the suits at Barry Swenson who offered up passionate support for a new hotel. Several residents spoke at the meeting about the terrible state of La Bahia and the added income, jobs and beauty they thought a grand hotel would bring to the waterfront.

"I'd much rather walk down Beach Street and see that," said Nicole Sanchez, pointing to a 3-D graphic of a sprawling inn. "I think it's absolutely beautiful and exactly what this community needs."

Planning Rendition

The Planning Commission got its go at the plan in front of a packed house Aug. 7, and despite the commissioners' disagreeing on nearly every aspect of the project, they were able to limit the session to a meager four hours in length.

The 3-2 vote in favor of the hotel plans highlighted the split among both commissioners and the public, with impassioned arguments made both for and against.

"When I look at the La Bahia as it is, it's not a very welcome sight," said Commissioner Judy Warner, cueing up a bleak photo of an iron gate set into a crumbling wall. "This new hotel would be a stunning building in a substandard part of our community."

Acting Planning Commission chairman Rod Quatararo agreed that the condition of the current apartments is laughable at best, but said he had yet to find the "extraordinary public benefit" required for him to support flattening the old building.

"I simply can't find an overwhelming reason to support demolition of the existing building," Quatararo said. "Not enough effort has been made to preserve the heritage of La Bahia."

More than 20 audience members spoke their minds at the meeting, including Marla Celli, who warned that if a new hotel builds 70-foot-tall towers, then "you're inviting anyone to build as high as they want," and Robert Defreitas, who proclaimed, "We need to leave the future generations something better than we have now."

Several Spanish-speaking residents of the Beach Flats community spoke through a translator and asked for an agreement with Barry Swenson Builder to provide money for educational and gang prevention programs for local Beach Flats youth.

It was early and often, however, that the commissioners let their opinions be known, and when the approval motion passed—barely—it sent a message to Barry Swenson not to pop the champagne cork just yet.

Each side will have its own bottle of bubbly when the Sept. 9 City Council meeting comes around, but only one-half of the folks will be toasting to a job well done. The other half will likely be drinking something stronger and wondering where they went wrong. **M**

*Metro Santa Cruz
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