

Council votes 4-3 to approve hotel project

Hotels & Boarding Houses
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SANTA CRUZ — After five hours of deliberation and a host of conditions, City Council in the wee hours Wednesday narrowly approved the

\$100 million Coast Santa Cruz Hotel project.

Plans for the oceanfront hotel and conference center, approved 4-3, now must be reviewed and submitted to the state Coastal Commission for its approval.

Voting against the project were Emily Reilly, Ed Porter and Tim Fitzmaurice.

The drawn-out deliberations began Tuesday night and ended with the vote about 1:15 a.m. Wednesday.

"This is only the first step in a lot

of steps that need to be taken to bring the project to realization," City Manager Dick Wilson said Wednesday. "The vote was to continue on with the next set of steps."

The City Council approved a joint effort by the city Redevelopment

Agency and hotel owner Northwest Hospitality Group to demolish the existing hotel on West Cliff Drive and build a 270-room hotel, conference

See **HOTEL** on **BACK PAGE**

Hotel

Continued from Page A1

center for 1,200 people and a six-story parking garage.

The approval allows the agency to spend \$1.5 million immediately for design drawings and bids from contractors.

Conditions imposed on the project suggested by various council members include:

- Reducing the overall mass of the hotel by 7.5 percent, or 20 rooms.

- Art displayed in the lobby and public spaces must be bought from local artists or relate to Santa Cruz memorabilia.

- Hotel garbage would be picked up after 8 a.m.

- Minimal street closures during hotel construction.

- Water conservation methods that exceed standard requirements, and consider using waterless urinals.

- Hotel brochures, marketing material and Internet map sites that direct traffic down Ocean Street and downtown, not Bay Street.

- An employee assistance program for hotel employees left out of work during construction.

- Affordable housing tax increment money from the project would go to "improving the quality of life" for nearby Clear View Court mobile-home park residents.

Supporters of the project, including Mayor Mike Rotkin, say it stands to generate millions in new tax revenue for the city and serve as a magnet for year-round tourism.

Opponents fear the size of the facilities would diminish the character of the prized beach area, and the city's financial investment of \$30 million isn't worth the risk.

Reilly, Porter and Fitzmaurice were united in opinion that not enough attention and time had been given to public comment and concerns.

A council majority shot down a proposal by Reilly to extend the council's decision by an additional six weeks to "have an open-ended discussion with the community."

"We're not done reaching out to people," Fitzmaurice said. "The project never gathered force with the public until the last month or so."

Fitzmaurice said his vote reflects his thoughts that the "site is already over-utilized," the financial risk to the city is too great and the impact on Westside neighbors would be a hassle.

"I'm going to continue to work aggressively to make this a better project. We have to — it's a really sensitive proposal for our area," he said.

Among Porter's concerns were the project's impact on the 150 residents of Clear View Court and traffic on Bay Street.

He said he also takes issue with "philosophical" changes to the city's general plan and the Beach South of Laurel plan.

"It was a no vote to the missing pieces of the process and the lack of process," Porter said. "If we're going to make changes to our general plan and zoning, we need to talk about them in advance."

"So far, it's not ready, and it wasn't ready for us last night."

Santa Cruz County Supervisor Mardi Wormhoudt, whose district includes the Westside, has publicly opposed the project and said city officials and the hotel owner are trying to "shoehorn it onto a given site."

"My own sense is that it's more than this site can handle," she said.

After Wednesday's decision, Wormhoudt said the narrow vote illustrates deep divisions and concerns by council members and local residents.

"There may be a real economic need, I don't debate that," she said. "But I don't think you can make decisions about land-use issues on the basis of needs for money."

Former Mayor Scott Kennedy, a strong advocate of the hotel and conference center redevelopment during his tenure, said the opposing council members had no excuse for not engaging the public more throughout the process.

"What have these council members been doing for the last year and a half, have they been asleep at the wheel?" Kennedy said. "Why didn't they work with people and why didn't they reach out?"

"To wait until the 11th hour is outrageous."

Hotel owner Bob Suits, who said he was pleased with the council's approval, said the opposing council members sent a strong message that the community needs to be included in the process.

"I didn't hear anybody say it was a horrible project," Suits said. "What I heard last night is that there is a definite desire to do something that's good for this community and that's the mission we'll deliver."

The council is scheduled to take a second vote on the project at its next meeting Feb. 8.

It could be several months before the proposal is presented to the Coastal Commission, which has final say on all coastal developments statewide.

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