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NOW: La Bahia, built 80 years ago in the Spanish Colonial Revival style, now has 44 apartments.

PROPOSED: Barry Swenson Builder is seeking approval for a 65-foot-tall hotel with 125 rooms.

La Bahia revamp moves forward



Dan Coyro/Sentinel photos

The Santa Cruz Historic Preservation Commission is leaning on developers to preserve the part of La Bahia that has the tower and the bell, seen above from La Bahia's courtyard.

Report details concerns with \$30 million hotel plan

Hotels and Boarding Houses 5-30-07

By **SHANNA McCORD**
SENTINEL STAFF WRITER

SANTA CRUZ — The latest hotel proposal to hit the beach area — designed to brush away some of the area's grit and attract upscale guests — requires losing a piece of Santa Cruz history and putting up a building about 25 feet taller than what the city allows.

Barry Swenson Builder plans to tear down the aging La Bahia apartment complex on Beach Street and replace the 80-year-old landmark with what's being billed as a boutique hotel with 125 rooms, 5,300 square feet of meeting space, a 3,000-square-foot bar and restaurant, swimming pool and underground parking garage with nearly 200 slots.

The four-star rooms at the proposed \$30 million hotel would go for \$200 to \$300 a night, according to Barry Swenson.

"We're definitely raising the bar for Beach Street," said Jesse Nickell, vice president of Barry Swenson. "We want to capture some of the tourist market



UC Santa Cruz students live in La Bahia during the school year while Boardwalk employees live there in the summer. Developers plan to build a hotel at the site.

before it goes farther south to Monterey or Carmel."

A draft environmental impact report was released Thursday, officially identifying the environmental concerns city officials will consider as they decide later this year whether to grant an amendment to the general plan that allows Barry Swenson to construct a 65-foot-tall building.

The environmental study, required by the California Environmental Quality Act, cites aesthetics — mainly the seven-story hotel's height — and loss of a historic landmark as "significant and unavoidable adverse impacts" of the

La Bahia

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project.

The City Council would have to approve a "statement of overriding consideration," essentially saying the benefits of the new hotel outweigh its environmental impacts.

Barry Swenson Builder estimated the project would generate \$600,000 each year in new taxes for the city and add about 100 new jobs. That is on top of cleaning up a historic site that has long been neglected.

Nickell said the hotel wouldn't be financially feasible without the additional height.

"We can't lose the room count and we do not want to chop off the top," he said. "We feel it's the best thing for the property. Architecturally, it's more interesting and allows for more ocean views."

Some fear a height exception for La Bahia would open the door for future beach area projects to do the same.

"I like a lot about the project, but it doesn't have to be that high," said Bill



A revamped La Bahia could bring \$600,000 a year in taxes, developers say. Dan Coyro/Sentinel

Malone, a member of Santa Cruzans for Responsible Planning, a community group that formed in 2005 to fight the proposed redevelopment of the Coast Santa Cruz Hotel on West Cliff Drive, about a quarter-mile from La Bahia.

"The next building will want to be higher and higher and higher," he said.

The amendment city leaders will consider for La Bahia would not apply to other projects.

Tearing down and reconstructing La Bahia requires a demolition permit from the city Historic Preserva-

tion Commission.

Commissioners Ross Eric Gibson, Clarke Shultes and David Subocz have been working with Barry Swenson Builder during the past few months to help shape the hotel's final design.

The commission would like the hotel to preserve La Bahia's Spanish Colonial Revival architecture, which Nickell said would be included in the project.

"We've been leaning on them strongly to replace or preserve the corner of La Bahia that has the tower and the bell," Shultes said. "That's one of the

unique components of the building. "Overall, I support it and promote it."

The environmental impact report asks Barry Swenson Builder to create an interpretive exhibit with graphic and narrative panels that document the history of La Bahia, and display the exhibit in the hotel's lobby.

Longtime Santa Cruz resident and historian Geoffrey Dunn said La Bahia, as it stands now, is nothing more than a "flop house."

The beach area, Dunn said, desperately needs new development, and La Bahia is one step in that direction.

"It's clear the Santa Cruz waterfront needs to re-emerge from the neglect of the last quarter-century," he said. "We need to develop the waterfront in ways that economically benefit the community."

A new hotel at the La Bahia site is allowed under the beach area plan adopted in 1998. Boardwalk expansion and other developments such as a parking garage near the amusement park were cut from the plan.

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