

Beachfront project gets OK; Santa Cruz battle lines drawn

OPPONENTS BEGIN BALLOT DRIVE TO STOP HOTEL, CONVENTION CENTER

By Ken McLaughlin
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It was back to the future on Tuesday night in Santa Cruz, and the year was 1974.

The Santa Cruz City Council gave final approval to a new hotel and conference center on a 4-3 vote, while a group opposed to the \$100 million beachfront project announced plans to put the hot-as-summer-sand issue

before voters.

Santa Cruzans for Responsible Planning, or SCRAP, hopes to evoke the memory of "Save Lighthouse Field," the rallying cry of community activists who used the ballot to kill a hotel and convention center in Santa Cruz 31 years ago and helped kick-start a movement to preserve the California coast that is still going strong.

The latest round is bound to be just

as bloody, as it exposes festering wounds in Surf City's renowned "progressive community." If opponents qualify their measure for the ballot, it will pit economic pragmatists against anti-growth idealists, "new" progressives against "old" progressives.

"The rancor is disturbing," said Vice Mayor Cynthia Mathews, who voted to give the project a green light.

Mathews is clearly in the pragma-

tist camp, believing that the city needs economic development to keep it from falling over a fiscal cliff.

"We're no longer living in the '70s, when you could raise taxes" to provide needed services, she said Tuesday night. "We're in a totally different world."

Appearing almost shaken, the soft-spoken Mathews rattled off a list of service and staff cuts the council has

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made over the past few years as dot-coms went bust and tourism dwindled after the Sept. 11 terrorist attacks. They included closing the Harvey West community pool part of the year, eliminating most park rangers patrolling its heralded greenbelt, and reducing hours at the teen center and Loudon Nelson Community Center.

Some concerns

Council members Emily Reilly, Ed Porter and Tim Fitzmaurice resisted pressure to change their votes and back the plan, saying they remained concerned about traffic, the Cowell Beach site, and whether average Santa Cruzans were adequately involved in the planning.

The new hotel would replace the famously ugly, 163-room "Dream Inn," now officially named the Coast Santa Cruz Hotel, adjacent to the municipal wharf. Current plans call for a 270-room hotel, but the council two weeks ago told the architect to reduce its size by 7½ percent. The city would float \$30 million in redevelopment bonds to build a six-level parking garage and 23,000-square-foot conference center and lease them back to the Northwest Hospitality Group of Idaho.

The redevelopment staff predicts the project will net the city at least \$500,000 a year once construction is completed — and revitalize the historic beach boardwalk area.

Now that a slim majority on the council has blessed the project, it moves to the state Coastal Commission, whose regional staff has called it "too bulky."

In a rare appearance before



the council Tuesday night, former Santa Cruz County Supervisor Gary Patton, the granddaddy of growth control on the central coast, urged the council to pay more attention to the community.

"What is wrong with this project is exactly what was wrong with Lighthouse Field," Patton said. "Please honor the public at large."

March 10 deadline

But council proponents stress that the project would be built on an already-developed site, not pristine land. And, they say, it is much smaller than the 10,000-seat convention center once envisioned for Lighthouse Field.

Opponents of the project have until March 10 to gather 3,892 valid signatures aimed at overturning Tuesday's council action, said City Clerk Leslie Cook. The earliest an election could be held would be August, she said.

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