

REMODEL

Commission endorses La Bahia hotel plan

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SANTA CRUZ » The Santa Cruz Planning Commission voted 5-0 on Thursday to recommend the City Council approve a transformation of the La Bahia Apartments into a 165-room full-service hotel, a plan that restores part of the Spanish Colonial Revival structure that has been a Beach Street fixture for 88 years.

On behalf of property owner Santa Cruz Seaside Co., French Resources Group proposes saving La Bahia's ornamental bell tower and the southeastern portion of the run-down structure. The remainder of the 1926 structure would be demolished to make way for the nearly 200,000-square-foot high-end conference hotel with a restaurant and spa, the likes of which city leaders and many residents have sought for years to elongate the tourist season and boost beach-area revitalization.

Khristina Horn, a West Cliff Drive resident who walks by La Bahia frequently,

said, "The area is prone to an excess level of unsavory activity, and any improvement in this area would be an improvement to the community overall."

The proposal is the largest of three put before city leaders in the past decade. Developers abandoned a plan OK'd in 2003 that saved more of the original structure but was not financially sound, and the state Coastal Commission denied a proposal in 2011 that required a zoning variance to stand more than five stories tall in some parts.

Designed by the San Francisco firm of Leddy Maytum Stacy, the newest proposal requires a planned development permit to accommodate a height of 43 feet in a few portions, whereas zoning calls for a maximum 36 feet, or three stories, without the permit. Historic demolition, design and coastal permits also are required; final approval can be appealed to the Coastal Commission.

As part of the approval process, the city also must certify a final environmental impact report that identifies the loss of historic resources and an increase in

area traffic. While the developer will be required to document and salvage historic elements and pay traffic fees to improve key intersections, city planners said increased hotel and sales tax revenue, expanded visitor-serving accommodations and new jobs are public benefits also mitigate those two main environmental impacts.

Developer Craig French said the building would bring an estimated \$1.4 million annually in new hotel lodging taxes and construction bidding will be open to union contractors, an issue that caused political problems for the 2011 plans. The hotel will be constructed to the city's green-building standards and may seek national green-building certification, French said.

Some speakers raised concerns about preservation, traffic, parking and the public trade-offs.

If the building was placed on the National Register of Historic Places, Joe Michalak of Santa Cruz said a federal tax credit for historic renovation could be taken advantage of rather than seeking demolition.



DAN COYRO — SENTINEL FILE

A developer has proposed remaking the historic 1926 La Bahia Apartments into a 165-room conference hotel.

"This is sustainable development," he said. "It is not taking the building to the dump."

Commissioner Mari Tuskin, who served on the panel for the beach plan and the two previous La Bahia proposals, said the time has come to develop the property.

"If anything could have

been made to fit the site, it would have been made," she said, noting that after she moved to Santa Cruz years ago, she was willing to "pull up the ladder" and oppose change. "But that can't happen anymore."

Commissioner Mark Primack, whose work can be seen throughout Santa Cruz, called the new La Ba-

hia "a gift to the community."

Commissioner Christian Nielsen recused himself Thursday because his firm has worked for Seaside Co., and Commissioner Peter Spellman was absent.

The plan heads next to the Historic Preservation Commission Aug. 13 and the City Council Sept. 9.