

Bridge spurs Beach Flats protest

A bridge connecting Ocean Street with the Beach Flats peninsula spearheads Santa Cruz City Hall's current plan to turn the residential neighborhood into a commercial and tourist center.

Construction of a convention center, a multi-level tourist center, and a multi-level parking garage in the Beach Flats area are also considered in the city's 1990 General Plan and Beach Area design proposals.

Locked between the Boardwalk and the San Lorenzo River, Beach Flats is one of the city's distinct pockets of lower income and Spanish-speaking residents.

Despite the city's desperate vacancy rate, the planners' Beach Area design program will disrupt many homes and apartment buildings.

But the Beach Flats Neighbors Association has organized to hamper the city's efforts.

"Our purpose right now," said Tony Souza of the neighbors' association, "is to reverse the decision for the bridge, to present alternatives to it, and to be sure the people who live in Beach Flats have a say in what's going on."

Plans for the bridge, which is partially intended to relieve traffic in the area, have been speeding along, however. On June 12, the City Council approved the expenditure of \$10,000 of federal Housing and Community Development (HCD) funds to study the impact and cost of the project. And on August 14, the council is expected to assign the study project to the lowest bidder.

"The purpose of the Ocean Street Bridge Study," according to Larry Pearson, staff planner with the City of Santa Cruz, "is to gather factual information so that an enlightened political decision can be made. The Ocean Street bridge has been discussed for over 20 years and no one has ever gathered any facts on the issue."

But Souza claims that the city "is already accepting the fact that the bridge is coming. The study will not lend itself to consideration of alternatives. It is just assumed that Beach Flats will absorb increased traffic impact."

Souza is also quick to point out that HCD funds are earmarked for projects that will specifically benefit low income people by helping to provide either housing or employment.

Construction of the bridge alone will take out some 15 homes. "It's not just buildings they want to move," said Souza, "it's the people—people who can least afford to be relocated."

Francine Adkins, another member of the Beach Flats Neighbors Association, believes the city's plans for the bridge are only the first step in a redevelopment program designed to change Beach Flats into a tourist and commercial area.

"There's a reason why this neighborhood has been allowed to deteriorate," claims Adkins. "Nothing is done for the people who live here."

According to residents, many services supplied to the Beach Flats area are substandard. There are few street lights, a frequently overflowing sewer system, no trees or parks, and telephone and electrical lines which continually malfunction.

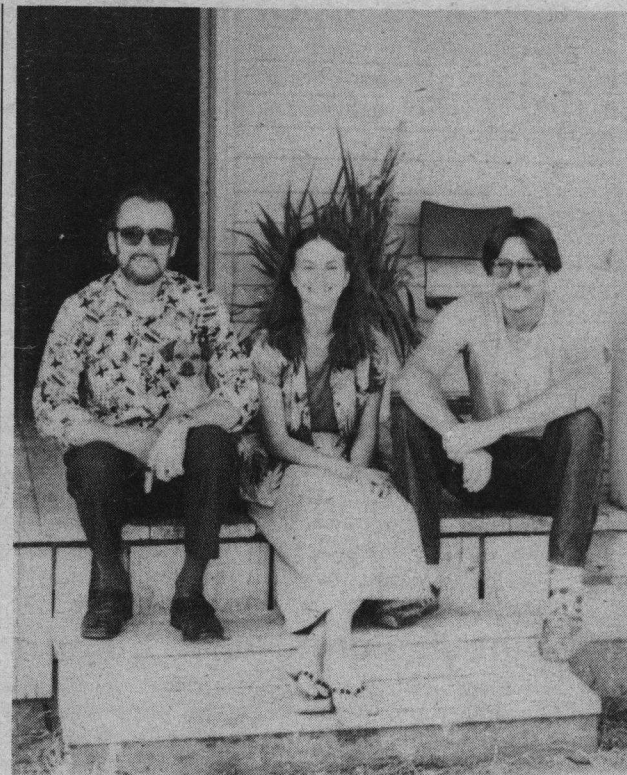
And the city can not work to correct the problems until the general plan—including the proposed bridge—and zoning changes—including the tourist oriented structures—are approved.

"The Ocean Street bridge decision could be the pivot point for the whole city," Souza believes. "It would raise havoc with all the different neighborhoods: people on Barson Street, Bay Street, the Downtown Neighbors Association, the Westside Neighbors Association. One way or another the Ocean Street bridge would connect with major street improvements that would seriously disrupt all these neighborhoods."

In explaining the structure of the neighbors association, Adkins said, "Since we are in such a small area, everybody knows each other here. There was strong one-to-one communication among neighbors that proceeded the organization of the association."

"I bet a group of organized neighbors was the last thing the city expected in the final stages of their planning." ■

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Sitting on the porch of the Beach Flats Neighbor Community Center at 216 Leibbrandt, are Tony Souza, Francine and Tom Adkins. The lime green victorian community center displays an outdoor bulletin board announcing meeting dates and neighborhood information.

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