

SC Ford's replacement ready for construction

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SANTA CRUZ — Construction of a five-story building called University Town Center could begin within two months on the old Ford's department store site, one of the key vacant lots remaining on Pacific Avenue.

Developer Barry Swenson has submitted a design application to the city's Planning Department for the milestone project, which is expected to house University of California Extension offices, classrooms and student apartments.

"Personally, I think it's just a grand place for students to be part of that downtown community, and for that community to be enlivened by the presence of the students," said Dean Fitch, acting director of Community Planning and Land Development at UC Santa Cruz.

Fitch emphasized that final contract language still must be negotiated before the deal is final, but he

is optimistic.

"We're getting closer in terms of figuring out what costs will be, but we just haven't gotten to the point where we can put pen to paper," said Fitch.

The proposed project also will feature general office space on the third floor, and a large retail area on the ground floor. An 800-square-foot public plaza will highlight the corner entrance of the building at Pacific Avenue and Cathcart Street.

"I'm very pleased with how the developer approached this project, both with respect to its design and the tenants," said Ceil Cirillo, executive director of the city's Redevelopment Agency.

The design, which is the work of Thacher & Thompson Architects of Santa Cruz, features a yellow ocher brick exterior with limestone trim throughout its massive facade.

Please see FORD'S — BACK PAGE

Ford's replacement

Continued from Page A1

"We took as our (guide) ... the classic community buildings of main streets in the United States," said architect Matthew Thompson. "The ones that seem timeless."

Thompson said the structure would be a "fairly serious building for downtown," with a "more permanent, substantive" look than some of the other earthquake-replacement projects his firm has designed for Pacific Avenue since the 1989 earthquake.

"Any successful community used to have a wealth of these buildings, and Santa Cruz still has a few," said Thompson, pointing to the old County Bank Building and the Neary Building. "We're trying to build on that tradition."

If the lease is successfully negotiated, the building's top two floors would house 51 apartments for the University Extension's International Program students. The second floor would be filled with university offices and classrooms, and the bottom floor would include the extension's registration/reception area.

The 85,026-square-foot building will replace a department store and a book shop, both of which were destroyed in the earthquake.

The vacant lot eventually was dubbed "Hippie Corner," because it regularly drew a rag-tag assortment of drug dealers, street people, transients and students.

Downtown business owners and city officials long have hoped Swenson would get started on rebuilding the lot, not only to continue downtown's revitalization but also to put an end to social problems on that corner.



A drawing of the building proposed for the Ford's site.

University Town Center has been on the drawing board for months while negotiations continued between UCSC and the developer. Earlier this year, there was discussion about including a multi-story parking structure behind the project, but that idea was dropped because it was too expensive.

The city still could build such a parking garage if it's necessary down the road, though.

Cirillo said the Redevelopment Agency is wrapping up a deal with the developer to trade the old book store lot next to Ford's on Pacific Avenue for land on the back portion of the lots.

She said the trade would help the developer with his project. It also would square off the existing parking lot, which would make a garage more feasible should the city decide to build it.

Zoning Board members are expected to review the proposed building's design on Nov. 20. The board's recommendation then will be forwarded to the City Council for final consideration on Dec. 9.

If approved, the project would be the second building downtown to combine retail, office and living

space.

The nearby Redtree Properties project on Pacific and Soquel avenues features retail, office space and market-rate apartments in a four-story building that's expected to be completed next spring.

Another key site where construction is under way is the triangular Flatiron Building at the top of Pacific Avenue. That building features retail and office space.

Rounding out the "big four" of current construction projects on Pacific Avenue is the Cooper House. City officials said work on that long-anticipated project could begin at the end of the month.

"We're really pleased about how many of these key parcels are finally being developed," said Councilman Scott Kennedy, chairman of the council's Redevelopment Committee. "The strength of the downtown economy ... obviously is encouraging to (developers)."

The Cooper House, Flatiron and Redtree projects all are being developed without signed leases from tenants. Developers are optimistic, however, that once the buildings are in place, tenants will be anxious to come downtown.