

# CHANGING FACE OF PACIFIC

Mixed-use projects eyed for expanding transit, housing, parking

*Pacific Ave.*

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DAN COYRO — SANTA CRUZ SENTINEL

Plans are underway to completely rebuild the Metro Center on Pacific Avenue in downtown Santa Cruz.

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**SANTA CRUZ »** In what could be the most significant development downtown in recent years, two projects look to revitalize a large portion of Pacific Avenue's south end by improving and expanding public transit, adding much-needed affordable housing and parking, and building connections with the Riverwalk and beach area.

Separate projects by Santa

Cruz Metropolitan Transit District and developer Owen Lawlor could stretch from just south of Cathcart Street to Laurel Street, with the two buildings fronting Pacific Avenue and reaching as far back as to the parallel Front Street, on the other side of which is the San Lorenzo River.

Depending on how the projects progress, they may require the acquisition of private and public parcels, as well as zoning changes to build as high as 75 feet, about six stories, on Pacific Avenue. The buildings

could step back on the Front Street side to lower the overall height.

The projects, which would be adjacent, are still in the design phase, but leaders for each proposal are working together and with the city to determine what combination of plans to pursue. They share the goals of creating more high-density housing and revitalizing a part of Pacific Avenue that, if it were more aesthetically pleasing and functional as the north end, could move the heart of

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**"This is totally going to change the face of south Pacific Avenue above Laurel Street."**

— Tom Hiltner, grants and legislative analyst for Metro

**+** **Online:** To view a map of the project sites for Pacific Station and developer Owen Lawlor's plans, visit [SANTACRUZSENTINEL.COM](http://SANTACRUZSENTINEL.COM) and click on this story.



downtown and the beach two blocks closer to each other.

"It's totally going to change the face of south Pacific Avenue above Laurel Street," said Tom Hiltner, grants and legislative analyst for Metro. "It's important to look at both projects in terms of concept design and see how they mesh together."

## Pacific Station

For its Pacific Station project, Metro is weighing options that range from simply renovating the current bus terminal and add parking above, or expanding the site in partnership with the city and a to-be-named developer to build as many as 100 housing units over four to five floors above ground-floor transit center, retail shops and restaurants. The project's footprint could be as large as 100,000 square feet, compared to the current 77,000 square feet.

"If we just rebuild the existing facility, just the new transit center, is that the most efficient use?" asked Alex Clifford, Metro's general manager. "It makes sense to have a mixed-use concept, public parking combined with housing."

The design options stem from a series of public workshops, community events and online forums during which nearly 1,000 people provided feedback. The Santa Cruz Chamber of Commerce and Downtown Association are in favor of a project that includes housing and parking.

Clifford said an expanded site also will allow Metro to create a "smooth" operational design for buses to pull in to designated bays on an angle rather than parallel park. The plans also could shift exiting to Front Street way from Pacific Avenue, which is seen to improve pedestrian safety.

The city is studying the proposed massing of several design options for how they compare to the rest of downtown, where

here are several five- and six-story structures built under the Downtown Recovery Plan formulated after the 1989 Loma Prieta earthquake leveled most of Pacific Avenue.

"This is an opportunity for a landmark location downtown and to revitalize lower Pacific Avenue with excellent urban design," said Bonnie Lipscomb, the city's economic development director.

The cost to Metro is estimated at \$20 million to \$30 million for its operations and offices on the ground floor. The city and Metro will work together to identify a housing developer, and try to tap frozen former redevelopment funds targeted for affordable housing, as well as state and federal grants that support transit-oriented development.

## The Lawlor project

Starting at the corner of Pacific Avenue and Laurel Street moving northward toward the Metro site, Lawlor's project calls for several stories of rental housing above retail space. The size of the project could be as large as 74,000 square feet and involve acquiring a city parking lot and other buildings.

"We thought Santa Cruz was ripe to have this kind of development," Lawlor said. "We all know the demand for housing is strong, but there is even more demand for high-walkability score locations."

The apartment building would offer studios, as well as one-bedroom and two-bedroom units, and offer parking underground.

"It serves a part of the income spectrum with a quality product, reduces the carbon footprint, creates a vibrant downtown and provides living environments that people are excited about," Lawlor said, adding that he hopes for approval this year to take advantage of financing opportunities. "We are willing to give it time to let these other pieces of the puzzle come together."

To approve either building at 75 feet, Lipscomb



PHOTOS BY DAN COYRO — SANTA CRUZ SENTINEL

Santa Cruz Metro is planning to rebuild its downtown transit center in partnership with the city of Santa Cruz. The land where the Nonprofits Insurance Alliance of California building sits, in the background to the right, could be part of the project.



The Nonprofits Insurance Alliance of California Building next to the Metro Center is being eyed as part of the transit agency's Pacific Station project that could include housing and retail.

said the downtown and local coastal plans would require changes, the latter of which would trigger a review by the state Coastal Commission. The projects also would require environmental review and traffic studies.

## NIAC option

The optimal plans, as envisioned by Metro and Lawlor, also involve buying the Nonprofits Insurance Alliance Groups building located at 333 Front St. behind the bus station and an employee parking lot used for public parking by the city in the evening.

Pamela Davis, founder, president and chief executive of NIAC, said she is willing to consider selling the site significantly renovated by the 25-year-old nonprofit, including a solar installation that generates 60 percent of its own power.

"We bought this building and put a lot of money into rehabbing it with the city's blessing in 2000," Davis said. "I saw what we could do to help improve that part of town — no one was all that enthusiastic about being there."

Davis said it will be difficult to find a similar 25,000-square-foot building downtown for her 90 employees, and that any cost to the nonprofit will be a cost to its 14,000 members.

"We don't want to stand in the way of progress," she said. "If these projects are going to happen and there is an opportunity for this part of town to change in a great way, that is going to be fine."

Lipscomb said NIAC is one of the largest employers in town and "it's really important to us and the entire community to keep NIAC in Santa Cruz."