

Weighing beach plan



Bill Lovejoy/Sentinel photo

Eduardo Gutierrez feels the beach plan would help the flats if it makes it safer to raise a family.

Many residents want change, but distrust city's promises

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Beach Flats
SANTA CRUZ — Some call it a slum, some proudly call it their barrio.

The Beach Flats neighborhood is many things to many people, and right now it's at the heart of the battle between opponents and supporters of the controversial Beach and South of Laurel Area Plan.

On a recent tour of the neighborhood, about 20 residents interviewed said they knew about the plan's suggestion of replacing some of the more run-down homes. Most said they would welcome a change, but that they didn't trust the city would live up to its promises of finding replacement housing.

Eduardo Gutierrez, 43, lives on Park Place, and while he's satisfied with his modest, \$650-a-month home, he would like to live in a place where things are fixed.

"I know the state (city) has studied the

'They (landlords) don't do anything to fix our places up. Even the floor in my place is broken and rotted.'

— **Eduardo Gutierrez,**
Beach Flats resident

issue for a long time, but I welcome some change here," Gutierrez said in Spanish, speaking through a translator. "They (landlords) don't do anything to fix our places up. Even the floor in my place is broken and rotted."

Gutierrez lives in the mix of some 350 homes and apartment units, all squeezed into a nine-acre area, that make up the Beach Flats neighborhood. More than 1,200 residents live there, making it the city's most dense neighborhood.

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The Beach and South of Laurel Area Plan encompasses more than 200 acres, including Beach Flats. The plan's major components have divided some high-profile city leaders and spurred a group to organize against the plan. In final implementation, the plan would expand the nearby Boardwalk, allow a new hotel, and realign Third Street, which would force the demolition of 19 Beach Flats homes. The plan also includes the possible demolition of other run-down residences.

Renovation vs. relocation

Both supporters and opponents of the beach plan believe their position is what's best for the residents there. Supporters of the plan say it will allow them a chance to get out of a run-down neighborhood, where 19 percent of the city's felony arrests occur. Opponents say the

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plan will force people with limited incomes out of their homes, and is only being done because it's a low-income, high-minority area.

A recent tour of the area, however, revealed that many residents know more about the plan than some give them credit for.

Most neighborhood residents interviewed were neither afraid of plan implementation nor excited about possible changes the plan may bring.

A supporter of the plan — Santa Cruz City Councilman Michael Hernandez — and an opponent of the plan — UC Santa Cruz student Veronica Lopez — acted as translators at separate times during parts of two days spent there.

The one thing that was clear is that residents are distrustful of government.

"I don't believe they will take care of us," said Edith Martinez, a resident of a 32-unit complex at 136 Leibrandt who lives with three children and her two brothers. "I heard some comments that they want us to get out, but we need help. I understand the city said it would help people if they have to leave."

Crime and overcrowding

The Beach Flats neighborhood is bordered by Riverside Drive to the north, Beach Street to the west and Third Street to the east and south.

On a recent afternoon, the colorful Beach Flats Park at Leibrandt and Raymond streets was alive with children laughing, running around and playing on play equipment there. Parents are often seen walking with their children to the store just up the way on Leibrandt. The scene overshadows the problems of crime, deteriorating homes and overcrowding often associated with the area.

Over the past 10 years, almost all former summer cottages, hotels and motels in the area have deteriorated due to a majority of absentee landlords, who rent out 99 percent of the 350-plus units in the area, according to city planners.

Homes are boarded up, have loose shingles and many are in disrepair. In the nine-acre neighborhood, 14 landlords own 60 percent of the property, and as many as 12 live outside the city.

City historian Ross Eric Gibson, who took part in the Beach Flats walk, said the oldest homes in the neighborhood date back to the 1860s and were part of a large ranch

What the city plans for residents

- With the planned realignment of Third Street, 19 units would be removed. The city would require developers to construct new affordable housing prior to realignment.

- Homeowners displaced from a property through acquisition will receive the cash difference between the purchase price and the cost to buy a replacement home.

- Displaced renters will receive moving expenses or a one-time payment based on the number of rooms. Recent state legislation may allow renters to receive the difference between new rent costs and existing rent costs or 30 percent of a person's income over 42 months, whichever is less.

- In a case where no city or other funding is available, the city's local rules require that low- and moderate income tenants displaced by demolition or conversion can receive two months of rent.

- Renters displaced will receive first pick of new affordable housing.

— Darrel Cole

that operated on the site. Back then it was also a resort area, and fishermen resided there.

Mary Beth has lived at her modest Seaside Company-owned home on Park Place for nine years with her husband Terry.

"Well, I kind of hate to see it happen," she said of the plan. "I really don't want to move."

Walking south on Kaye Street, homes look more in disrepair. Several are boarded up. But people dot the area, carrying bags of groceries from the nearby store or walking with their children.

"Yea, I heard about that plan," said Steve Bargiacchi, who has lived at his small home on Kaye and Park Place for about two years. "I just want to know if they are going to lower my rent. I pay \$1,000 a month now."

Like many residents interviewed, Bargiacchi doesn't mind living there.

"If they do make us move, where would they move us to?" he asked, looking at Councilman Hernandez. "It's hard enough finding a place to live. But there's too much crime in this area now."

A tight community

Gibson said the small streets in the area lent themselves to a close community.

"You had small homes that also made it more open," he said. "Now you have taller apartment-type buildings in some areas, where the walls come right up against the sidewalk."

Martha Lopez, a mother of three, has lived in her modest Park Place home for 10 years. She said she knows some homes could be torn

down, but also that it won't happen for many years and that the city will help people relocate.

"It's a dangerous area for my kids," she said.

She said she applied to get into the city's recent affordable-housing developments at Sycamore and Neary Lagoon, but was not chosen in those lotteries.

"I have looked to leave, and if the city would help, I would go," she said.

City officials point out they have put effort and money into cleaning up the neighborhood, with a new beach patrol, as well as stricter enforcement of how landlords care for their property. Since those efforts, the percent of felony arrests in the neighborhood decreased from 38 percent in 1996 to 19 percent in 1997.

The complex at 136 Leibrandt was the focus of many of those police calls several years ago, as well as a city push to improve living conditions in some units.

Several residents of the complex offered their thoughts on the Beach Area Plan upon the urging of property manager Maria Gutierrez, who opposes the plan. The eight-year property manager said residents there pay between \$400 and \$600 a month for the tiny units.

"They (the city) told us they will change things," said Francisco Sanchez, 25. "They only say it will look nice, but we don't believe they will want to help us. It will take a long time to change things."

Martha Acosta, 71, has lived there eight years, and asks the question many residents ask. Why should they believe their city will help them now after so long ignoring basic things, like fixing streets and lighting.

Gutierrez said many of her tenants fear the government because most don't have green cards, which give them the right to work in this country.

A small white van pulls up to the complex on Leibrandt, bearing goodies in the form of pastries and baked goods. It's a tradition in the barrio, kind of like the ice cream truck driving into neighborhoods.

The driver of the van, Jose Casorivera, lived in Beach Flats for 12 years before being one of the lucky ones chosen to live in the new Sycamore affordable-housing complex seven months ago.

"It's a lot better because there's no problems," he said, as several children ran up to the van, picking their pastry and putting money in a jug. "Here is not so safe, and I think people want change here, they're just afraid."