

Tonight: Moment of truth for Longs plan

By Paul Rogers
Mercury News Staff Writer

One of the most contentious community battles in recent Santa Cruz history will be decided tonight when the Santa Cruz City Council votes on a plan to build a new Longs drugstore near neighborhoods on the city's Westside.

Through 15 months of petitions, counterpetitions, letters to the mayor and plain old name-calling, the fight over the two acres at Mission and Olive streets has taken on an intensity generally reserved for toxic dumps and nuclear power

‘It’s easily the most controversial issue the council has had this year.’

— Santa Cruz Mayor Don Lane

plants.

“It’s easily the most controversial issue the council has had this year,” Mayor Don Lane said. “I can’t think of anything that’s even close, not even the Navy ship.”

Santa Cruz developer George Ow Jr. and his wife, Gail Michael-

lis-Ow, have proposed building a \$3 million Longs store — 27,000 square feet, 25 feet high — on the lot. The building would have parking in front for 121 cars.

The plan includes demolishing the building now on the property, which houses the Westside Com-

munity Health Center. Monday, the health center announced plans to move to a site about a mile south, at Mission and Walnut streets.

The Ows say the drugstore would create \$100,000 a year in new local sales and property taxes, as well as a \$1 million annual pay-

roll with jobs for 50 people.

“The main benefit is that people could shop in their own neighborhood for basic necessities,” Ow said in an interview.

But people who own homes nearby worry that the project would encroach too far into their quiet neighborhood.

They fear increased noise and traffic, not to mention the precedent set if the council changes the zoning on the parcel from residential to commercial.

“Basically, it’s just inappropriate,”

See DRUGSTORE, Page 2B

Feelings running high over controversial plan for Long's in Santa Cruz

■ DRUGSTORE

from Page 1B

ate to put (it) right in the middle of a neighborhood," said Dennis Wheeler, whose house sits 20 feet from the lot. "The traffic would be a nightmare."

A month ago, the city's planning commission voted 5-2 against the project, citing traffic and zoning concerns. For that meeting, an unprecedented 500 people turned out.

A draft environmental impact statement concludes that the project would increase traffic at the site from 97 cars a day to 908 every weekday.

Both sides in the fight have organized. And in true Santa Cruz fashion, they've used textbook grass-roots techniques.

The Ows have hired workers to circulate petitions and consultants to study traffic, landscaping and architectural design. The neighbors have formed the Westside Neighborhood Alliance, complete with monthly bulletins thick with computer graphics.

Council members aren't saying how they'll vote.

The debate puts many of them in an awkward position, forcing choices between allegiances.

Santa Cruz's liberal movement was built around preserving neighborhood integrity. In elections dur-

ing the past decade, the liberals have dominated the council by courting neighborhood groups and siding with their concerns.

But in the case of Long's, they cannot simply give a rubber stamp "no." The council is confronted with a developer well respected among liberals. The Ows have a long record of philanthropy in the local arts and publishing communities.

In fact, a cadre of prominent area liberals, such as Aptos writer Geoffrey Dunn and Santa Cruz civil rights activist Tony Hill, are supporting the project.

In addition, many in the business community say the project could give a much-needed boost to Santa Cruz's image at a time when it is still struggling to attract new developers who can help rebuild the earthquake-shattered downtown.

All the posturing has left many residents wondering whether the hard feelings certain to linger after the vote are worth it.

"It has become symbolic beyond what I think it really merits," the mayor said. "The whole thing's grown out of proportion."

IF YOU'RE INTERESTED

The Santa Cruz City Council meeting will begin at 7 p.m. in the Santa Cruz Civic Auditorium, 307 Church St.