

Downtown lot eyed for public commons

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SANTA CRUZ — Members of the council's Redevelopment Committee have set their sights on the vacant lot at Pacific Avenue and Church Street as the possible location for a downtown public commons.

On Tuesday, the committee asked Councilman Scott Kennedy and Redevelopment Agency Executive Director Ceil Cirillo to talk with property owner Louis Rittenhouse about the feasibility of such a project.

The Rittenhouse family parcel is one of the few remaining post-



Kennedy



Rittenhouse

earthquake vacant lots on Pacific Avenue where there are no rebuilding plans in the works.

"I believe now that because the downtown is doing so well and the lots are being filled up, this is a decision that, if we don't make

it in the near future, will be made for us by default," said Kennedy. "(We're) going to meet with Louis to see if there is any interest in a joint project."

Kennedy said he envisions a situation where the Rittenhouses could build a retail project in the back and on both sides of the lot, with a public commons area in front that would be funded with city money.

The common area could be everything from a children's play area to a simple fountain with space to sit down.

Rittenhouse said Wednesday that he was in the dark on any

city discussions about his family's property, but he was willing to listen to proposals.

"I have no idea what they're talking about," said Rittenhouse, a former member of the City Council. "But I spent four years listening to what the council had to say, so I guess I could give it another hour-and-a-half."

Mayor Cynthia Mathews, a member of the Redevelopment Committee, said she believes a joint project would be best.

"My own preference, if we're going to do it at all, is to integrate a private development with

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some kind of public involvement," said Mathews.

One of the issues to be addressed is who would manage the public commons area to ensure it would not become a gathering place for the undesirable element of people that already is breaking laws in the downtown area.

"I don't think we have to re-invent the wheel on this, we just have to do it right," said Councilwoman Katherine Beiers, the third member of the Redevelopment Committee. "Looking at real public space for this community in the future is just real high on my list."

The committee asked staff members to investigate more thoroughly how such a space could be properly managed to

head off any problems.

Of course the biggest stumbling block facing the city if the council decides to proceed with such a project is where to find the money to fund it.

Redevelopment Committee members acknowledged that there is no funding currently available to pay for such a project, whether it be entering into a joint venture with the Rittenhouse family or buying the property outright.

Kennedy suggested that if the council decides to back the project, among the funding options would be a general-obligation bond.

And if the Rittenhouse family does not want to cooperate, said Kennedy, there is the option of eminent domain, which is a legal process that would allow the city to take the property for public

use after paying fair-market value for it.

Kennedy acknowledged there are so many pieces of the puzzle that must fall into place for a public commons area to become a reality that the idea may seem "far-fetched."

But Beiers disagreed. "The community has asked for this since the earthquake," she said. "I think it's an idea that's far away, but not far-fetched."

Members of Vision Santa Cruz, a community-based group organized in the wake of the 1989 earthquake to figure out how to rebuild downtown, had wrestled with the idea of identifying space for a public commons. But concerns about existing social problems downtown being exacerbated led members to drop the idea from the formal Downtown Recovery Plan.