

City gives OK to study plaza sites

Pacific Ave

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Committee sees Rittenhouse land as best prospect

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SANTA CRUZ — The city is closer to getting a downtown plaza, and the controversial proposal to take the Pacific Avenue and Church Street property from an unwilling seller is still a possibility.

The Santa Cruz City Council voted 7-0 late Tuesday to have the city's planning staff and already-hired consultants investigate an appropriate place for a plaza. Potential public gathering places include Cathcart and Front streets, Walnut and Pacific avenues and even closing a downtown a street to turn it into the plaza, and the Rittenhouse property at Church and Pacific.

In addition, the council voted to form a task force of seven council-appointed members and three council members that would periodically meet with city staff and consultants about the areas being looked at.

A list of possible sites, with costs, could come back to the council within 90 days.

The vote came after the Downtown Plaza Committee, made up of plaza supporters, presented the some arguments about the need for a central gathering place downtown. The committee conducted its own investigation of areas downtown that could be turned into a plaza and concluded that the Pacific and Church site is the best spot.

Dozens of supporters told the council a plaza is needed. Most reiterated that the Rittenhouse-family-owned Pacific and Church site is ideal.

The 20,000-square-foot lot is not

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Plaza

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for sale, however. Louis E. Rittenhouse, a former councilman, has said repeatedly that he won't sell and is about two months away from presenting development plans to the city Planning Department.

He said the project will be an anchor tenant likely to include retail and office space.

Councilman Mike Rotkin said he is in favor of a study and isn't ruling out the Rittenhouse site. But the possible court battle and property costs would be determining factors.

At a minimum, the lot would cost at least \$2 million, according to city staff. And Rittenhouse has said he's ready for a fight if the council targets his property.

Councilman Christopher Krohn said the plaza committee "has made a compelling case" and that he would consider other sites but thinks the end result will be the Rittenhouse site.

From an architect's rendering, the plaza could include a small retail/cafe operation in a two-story structure at one end of the lot with a restroom. Lining the lot could be palm trees, a small bandstand area with lighting and a public restroom.

The dream for plaza supporters is to have a public gathering place, but more importantly a place where everyday shoppers and downtown visitors can take a rest. The Rittenhouse lot is the best space still vacant, they say, because it's central to downtown — right next to Cinema 9 — and would break up an area surrounded by large buildings, including the Cooper House at Cooper Street and Pacific.

Having the plaza on either end of downtown, or somewhere off the beaten path, isn't the answer, advocates of the Rittenhouse lot as a plaza say.

Opponents of a downtown plaza also point to the fact that the downtown recovery plan known as Vision Santa Cruz doesn't call for a plaza on Pacific Avenue.

One of the fears of plaza opponents, including some businesses, is that the public space will become a hangout for homeless people, or be a magnet for other problems.

The council could take the property through the eminent domain process, but that would have to pay the owner's portion of South Ca