

## Coming Soon ... to an Empty Hole Near You

The E.C. Rittenhouse Building begins construction

by Patrick Dwire

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One of the last big holes left in the heart of downtown Santa Cruz from the Loma Prieta Earthquake is about to finally be filled. The sign above the security fence around the historic hole at the corner of Pacific Avenue and Church Street, near Cinema 9, includes an architectural rendering of a very large, stately building that will be "coming soon," but the sign has been there so long that it is mostly ignored by locals. Every spring the passion flowers growing on the chain-link security fence get thicker, and get more attention from locals on their way to Starbucks, than does the sign promising that a new, monumental building will someday supposedly dominate the corner.

"Coming soon" has finally arrived. The E.C. Rittenhouse Building, four stories of retail and office space that will exceed the height of the Cinema 9 building, is slated to begin construction on Aug. 1, according to Michael Bethke of Slater Construction, the general contractor for the project. Slater Construction got the final go-ahead from the Santa Cruz City Council on June 27 to close the west-bound lane of Church Street to traffic during construction to allow room for construction equipment. A covered, pedestrian corridor will be built on the Pacific Avenue sidewalk in front of the construction site, which will presumably spell the end of the passion flower vines that cover the old security fence.

The architectural rendering on the "coming soon" sign shows a building looking like a hybrid of the Federal Reserve and San Francisco's Macy's. The building is described by Hans Baldauf, the lead architect for Louis Rittenhouse, former city council member and owner of the property, as a "classically designed downtown mercantile building." The Web site for BCV Architects of San Francisco, where Baldauf is a principal, states the building "is sensitive to the surrounding context and historic precedents of this neighborhood, blending the commercial vocabulary of Pacific Avenue with the civic character of Church Street."

The building will enclose a total of about 66,000 square feet of retail and office space, with retail expected on the street level and second floor, topped by two stories of office space. During the approval hearings for the building, the developers said that the "completely customizable" second, third and fourth story space would be ideal for high-tech start-up firms wanting a prestigious address in downtown Santa Cruz. According to leasing agents for the

building, no major tenant has yet signed up to occupy the space.

Depending on your perspective, the new E.C. Rittenhouse Building (which incidentally is named after Louis Rittenhouse's grandfather) can be seen as a narrow triumph for private property rights or a narrow defeat for public space. Many will recall the increasingly rancorous debate about the need for a new downtown plaza on the site, which captured the imagination of many advocates and more than a few city council members back in 1999-2000. The advocates said a downtown plaza was critical to help preserve some of the pre-earthquake, pedestrian friendly identity of downtown Santa Cruz. Critics said such a plaza would become just another vagrancy magnet, and questioned just who such a public plaza would serve. Throughout it all, Louis Rittenhouse insisted the property was not for sale, and that he was eventually going to construct a building on it.

At one point in the public plaza debate, in late 1999, four of seven city council members indicated support for the idea. However, because Rittenhouse was consistently "crystal clear" that his property was not for sale, attention focused on the need for one more council member to support the downtown plaza, which was not forthcoming. A "super-majority" council vote, requiring an affirmative vote of five of the seven council members, is required by state law to initiate eminent domain proceedings against an unwilling seller.

After a two-and-half year planning process in which designs were batted back and fourth between the zoning board and the designers, the building ultimately failed to garner the support of the board, but was approved on appeal by the city council back in May of 2001. Critics at the time said the building was just too big, and should have been set back further from the corner to allow more public space, like the new Cooper House building. In lieu of more pedestrian space at the corner of Pacific Avenue and Church Street, the building will have a prominent, classic street clock attached to it at the second story.

The only other historic hole left to be filled on Pacific Avenue is located next door to Lulu Carpenter's, owned by Eric Lau. Lau and developer Jay Paul have pitched plans for a five-story multi-use building for the lot that stretches between Pacific Avenue and Center Street. Plans for this new building have recently been submitted to the Planning Department.



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