

Capitola's Newest Shopping Complex Becomes Center for Debate



Greenhouse buildings are reminiscent of a time when the property was a commercial flower bulb ranch.

by Mary Bryant

Along Capitola's busy 41st Avenue corridor, across from the Capitola Mall on Clares Road, sits over ten acres of undeveloped commercially zoned land.

Until recently, flower bulbs grew in the greenhouses on the property—the remaining parcels of what was once the substantial land holdings of the Brown Family.

The greenhouses and ranch buildings are in contrast with both the nearby modern-styled stores and offices, and the adjacent two-story homes.

And the fact that the Brown Family is now applying for permission to build an 86,000 square foot retail center (104,000 square foot total with the second phase), has left them directly in the middle of controversy.

On either side of the debate rests two groups. Speaking against the project, as it is currently designed, are near-by homeowners and county officials. And while Capitola's city council members have yet to thoroughly discuss the issue, city staff and the developer's consultants have been busy attempting to find answers to numerous questions.

The issues at hand are not particularly unique. Traffic, noise, pedestrian access and money were hot topics this last month as Capitola's city

council held a public hearing to consider certifying the project's Environmental Impact Report (EIR). The EIR had been certified once before, but legal action by the county supervisors meant Capitola had to expand and review the document again.

The hearing was held to allow council members to receive testimony about the EIR, but local residents had many of their own concerns to discuss.

Bill Hall, who lives directly behind the site, said of the proposed project: "The ten-foot noise wall will do nothing to minimize noise to second floors of homes," which he noted were mostly bedrooms. He went on to report about early morning truck deliveries and noisy parking lot sweepers, and objected to the close proximity (about ten feet in places) from the planned center to existing homes.

Others from the audience, about 15 in total, presented their individual complaints. One resident said he had also polled his neighbors and found most of them unanimously opposed to further retail construction in the area.

Almost all who spoke were, at least in part, concerned with the increase in traffic that the new center would bring to already crowded roadways.

As projected, the Brown's center would bring about 5,000 more vehicles to the

area each day. While some suggest many of these people would be shoppers already headed to the 41st Avenue district, new traffic would certainly have to be accommodated by Capitola Road.

This seems to be the general point of concern for many, since proposed off-site improvements to the intersection of Clares Road and 41st Avenue would mitigate most of the increased traffic coming from Highway 1.

The problems along Capitola Road are not as easy to solve. Supervisor Robley Levy said of the concerns, "I think the new EIR does identify the impacts, and they

are very broad. And, I think the very real question is how impacts would be mitigated by this project."

If the only solution were to increase the number of lanes on Capitola Road and install curbs and gutters to 17th Avenue, as the county originally suggested, the fees to the developer or the city would be extraordinary.

As to the equability of this proposal in relation to the Brown's center Levy said, "The EIR discussing it really says that impact was caused by development to this point, that it [roadway improvement] is demanded by the current conditions rather

than being an impact that would be developed by the Brown development itself."

Levy added, "I think that it's very clear that the need for extension of Capitola Road is affected both by development in Capitola and development in Live Oak... I would certainly hope there is room for compromise because it seems to me that for the city and the county to get into a legal battle over this doesn't solve any real problems for people either in the Live Oak area or the Capitola area—indeed for anyone who uses those roads."

Capitola councilmember Michael Routh brought up the point. He suggested that it may not matter as much where motorists are headed as by where they live. "I have mixed emotions on it. It'll probably attract some more traffic to the 41st Avenue area... the thing that sticks in the back of my mind is that those people that are coming there [41st Avenue] have to live somewhere... and the county's providing all the housing for these people... and they're doing nothing to accommodate the traffic that they're generating and I don't think that's right."

Routh went on to add, "I think there's got to be some negotiated position on this and I'm not totally unwilling to say that Capitola should contribute something to the improvement on Capitola Road... I think I'd be willing to look at a plan that extends beyond Capitola's boundaries, but again I think the bulk of the commitment has to come from the county and their redevelopment funds."

County Supervisor Jan Beautz, elected to office in 1988, has a slightly different point of view.

"I think the basic issue here is that road [Capitola] is



Trees planted for noise abatement still have to "fill out."

taking a lot of traffic from the whole mall. This [the 41st Avenue district] has become probably more of a regional shopping center than most people realized when it was built... the freeway is congested a lot of the time and one complaint I had about the EIR is [that] the freeway figures were from 1985... I'm not saying that Live Oak's growth hasn't also contributed to traffic on Capitola Road... but at some point we have to look at things realistically. And, realistically, Capitola Road is a very impacted road and a large part of that is due to the commercial development."

As to a realistic approach to solving the existing problems, Beautz suggested, "One concern I have is really the intersections where you get a lot of your traffic back-up... If there was some way we could work on the intersections, or put in some extra lights..."

There may also be others to contribute to some of the improvements. Developers are presently proposing 20 single-family homes at the Antonelli property, similar to the Brown site in that both fields were once begonia bulb ranches.

Beautz reported that the developers "are doing an EIR now which will include a traffic study on the project... I would certainly suspect that they would have to do a lot of remedial work on that area."

Live Oak did grow quickly during the past decade and often beyond the improvements to the roads, drainage and sidewalk systems.

Now, this is changing as new developers are required to pitch into the reconstruction and expansion of streets, and redevelopment district funds are providing for county sponsored projects.

Beautz said, "The corner of Portola and 17th Avenue, for instance, is a \$1 million project... It was a very unsafe area." As to the enormous cost of some of the roadway improvements where private property must be purchased to provide needed right-of-ways, Beautz added, "they don't look as expensive as they are... that's what's hard about retrofitting an area. It's really difficult to go back and try to retrofit because you've got to acquire the land... I agree in the past there has been very little attention paid the Live Oak area, but I think that has changed. It's starting to really show what's happening, but things don't get built over night."

Still beyond the traffic concerns, Beautz is disturbed about other aspects of the project. As a result of the noise issues raised by neighbors to the site, Beautz believes a

wider area should be maintained between the houses and the shopping complex. "I think that you would need a 25- to 35-foot buffer and that it should be really heavily planted and bermed and made in a way so it does absorb noise... for me what he's trying to put in there is much too large for that property."

Beautz is also worried that previous mitigation measures to protect homeowners from noise have not worked well. "What were suppose to be mitigation [measures] were not done adequately or haven't been kept up. If you say we're going to have this landscaped area but half of it's dead or never grew... that didn't accomplish what it was supposed to accomplish."

One remaining question is how did the Browns and their project get caught up in the middle of all this. One can only speculate at this point since Barclay Brown, one of the principal property owners, isn't talking until after the upcoming public hearing.

It may be part of the price for waiting too long or wanting to start too soon. In other words, a proposal several years ago would likely have not met with such debate. Likewise, a project designed after Capitola Road was improved might not meet with as many concerns.

Regardless, the Browns have been clear about their intentions to build a shopping center on their land for years, and the property was designated for commercial uses prior to the time most of the nearby homes were built.

Beautz believes this ultimately doesn't matter. She said, "The law has shown in the past that just because someone was there first, they can not make other peoples property completely useless... I think that many of the people that testified at the hearing said that they knew there was going to be some commercial development... the reason we have CEQA [California Environmental Quality Act] is to look at these things and balance them justly... finances are not really to be considered as part of the CEQA process... the idea is not to tailor mitigation to a person's financial aspects... and sometimes development is premature... if you want to wait long enough then some of the road will be corrected in other ways... I think it's all a case of balance."

Ultimately, this balancing act will be left to the members of Capitola's city council. The final public hearing on the project is scheduled for January 10, 1991, and debate is likely to be lively as all parties attempt to tilt the scales in their favor. □