

Council OKs development extension

Rittenhouse given three years to build on downtown parcel

1989 Earthquake Santa Cruz City Rebuilding

By **DAN WHITE**
SENTINEL STAFF WRITER

A divided City Council gave property owner Louis Rittenhouse three more years to develop his rubble-strewn parcel in the heart of downtown.

But it's also clear that council members, who voted 5-2 on the extension Tuesday, are growing weary of the lot's appearance. The 20,000-square-foot space on the corner of Church Street and Pacific Avenue has sat vacant for 15 years, attracting graffiti, chin-high weeds and trash but no retail or business tenants.

Even those who support the extension expressed concern about the property's squalid looks.

Often called an "earthquake hole," the site contains the ruins of buildings that were knocked down after the 1989 Loma Prieta quake. Nothing has been built since.

Now, three years after the council approved Rittenhouse's plans for a four-story, 90,510-square-foot retail and office building, there's still nothing attractive



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TIM FITZMAURICE, CITY COUNCILMAN

on the spot but a cluster of wild poppies.

But council members, including Mark Primack, insisted a good project would be worth the wait. Primack said it would be wiser to keep the land open as a "place holder" than to rush through a project that did not live up to the city's standards.

Councilman Tim Fitzmaurice, who voted against the extension, said he worried the land would just sit there growing weeds, and Rittenhouse would still have nothing built when the three-year extension ran out.

He expressed concern that Rittenhouse has not started building within the allotted three years after the council approved the project in 2001.

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sort of expect this to come back (to the City Council) in 2007."

He also took aim at a suggestion that the property could benefit from temporary landscaping, which he likened to "putting a tuxedo on a pig."

Councilman Ed Porter, who also opposed the extension, said so many offices are vacant downtown that he wasn't convinced the project would be "a smart thing to do." He suggested the project include housing.

After Fitzmaurice said he was "very concerned this project won't happen in my tenure," Rittenhouse replied, "I can assure you that my concern is far greater than yours."

Rittenhouse said he'd already invested

more than \$1 million for drawings and design, and blamed the economic downturn after the Sept. 11 terror attacks for the delay.

"I don't think anyone had any idea of what would happen that September after you approved this project," he said.

Rittenhouse said he's encouraged by the surge of retail interest downtown, and is trying to get commitments from businesses by offering below-market rents.

The council also was scheduled to discuss a proposed revision to the city's mobile-home rent control ordinance, in response to looming rent hikes for Clear View Court residents who don't fall under rent control protections.

But residents and the park owners have asked for more time to discuss the proposal. The council discussed the matter in closed session Tuesday night and plans another closed session next week, followed by open discussion during a special meeting on April 20.

Contact Dan White at
dwhite@santacruzsentinel.com